

Book review

Why we need welfare: collective action for the common good

Pete Alcock

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In *Why We Need Welfare* Pete Alcock presents both a detailed defence of welfare but also a new vision for a 'welfare society'. What he means by this term is a progressive and comprehensive system of human welfare which is necessary for the challenges we face in the twenty-first century. Alcock defines welfare broadly, theoretically, analytically and normatively around how we understand society. It is a book fundamentally concerned with welfare as the underpinning of a good society.

The initial chapters of the book build a broad understanding of welfare as a common and collective issue, how we understand it philosophically and theoretically in terms of citizenship, social justice and equality, and what the main issues of welfare are. In doing so the text is less concerned with what is sometimes seen as the narrow definition of welfare as the structure and operation of the benefit system, and rather with all areas of social policy. In making a case for welfare, the text draws out the origins of the welfare state in the UK and its evolution since 1945.

The chapters on how we deliver welfare and the debates on who benefits from it provide a lucid account of how the universal understanding and delivery of welfare have been undermined over the last forty years. These chapters not only provide an account of the choices that policy makers have made but also examine the debates which have informed these choices. An example would be the influence of the work of Julian Le Grand on the introduction of quasi markets into the delivery of health care.

One of the many strengths of Alcock's writing is that he is able to articulate nuances in debates on welfare. He moves beyond reliance on binary classifications such as state/provider control and markets / user demand. Although the state is a vital convenor and orchestrator of welfare, something which is to be defended, he underlines how welfare must be based with regard to civil society, and it is this that gives the sub-heading of the text of 'collective action for the common good'. Another example of nuance is Alcock's appreciation of the role of the voluntary and community sector. He sees it as an important part of wider civil society and a mechanism for collective action, but equally avoids the flawed approaches formulated either conceptually by communitarianism or in policy terms by David Cameron's Big Society.

The book does not set out a detailed blueprint for a future model of welfare, but it does seek to explore the challenges it will face in the future (whether from demographic change or environmental crisis) and the key coordinates needed for any sensible debate (from rethinking public services to an understanding of the public good). However, where Alcock is very clear is that the assumptions of neoliberalism must be overturned and the case remade for an acceptance of higher levels of taxation and expenditure if a more just and equal society is to be attained. Again there is nuance here. The focus is not on redistribution per se, but rather with the need for a new understanding of citizenship and civil society which lies beyond individuals and individual well-being. Public opinion has turned against the 'welfare state' and hence a new case that is more rooted in civil society must be made.

Alcock is not alone either in charting the pressures that welfare is under or in trying to identify the future directions welfare may take. In many respects this book needs to be read alongside other work, such as the writings of John Hills (e.g., Hills, 2014) and Peter Taylor-Gooby (e.g., Taylor-Gooby, 2013), or the analyses by civil society organisations and think tanks such as the Carnegie Trust (Wallace, 2013) and the New Economics Foundation (Coote and Franklin, 2010). But what Alcock perhaps does more than these is twofold: firstly, his account is much broader in scope than much of this other work; and secondly, because of this it is an argument which could and should have a readership beyond either academia or the narrow welfare policy community. It has an understanding of not just the big debates in social policy but also with regard to policy making and civil society more generally.

Inevitably with a text such as this there are choices to be made as to what to include and what to omit. Firstly, this is primarily an account of welfare in the UK. Developments in other countries (whether continental Europe or the USA) are touched on only briefly and principally to underline the point that welfare regimes can look very different. Secondly, Alcock has largely avoided including a detailed account of the success or otherwise of specific programmes and initiatives. As such it largely avoids drawing on evidence from policy and programme evaluations, and in particular the social policy programmes launched by New Labour.

Thirdly, the book focuses on evolutions and continuities between political administrations rather than attempting to chart or defend specific governments over others. The broad argument is that welfare has increasingly been undermined by neoliberalism. Fourthly, and perhaps deliberately, the focus is not with the changes to social security and the reductions in benefit entitlements (outside the state pension system) implemented since 2010 by the Coalition and Conservative governments. Others have already charted how these 'welfare reforms' are bearing down hardest on the poorest groups and areas in the UK (e.g., Beatty and Fothergill, 2016).

Alcock does not consider some welfare developments. Whilst there is mention of the social investment state approach (what Ed Miliband reworked as 'pre-distribution' in the 2015 General Election campaign), he does not explore new funding models such as social impact bonds or social impact investing. Similarly the growing interest in asset-based welfare either in its focus on addressing inequality in wealth or in its community development guise is largely skated over. It is here that an opportunity to tie a new case for welfare back to theoretical conceptions of welfare such as Sen's capability approach is missed (Sen, 2001). However, these are minor concerns. Indeed, with the help of summaries and key text sections at the end of each chapter the reader is left with enough clues as to where these agendas are more fully covered.

The book was published before the UK's EU referendum on 23 June 2016. References to the influence of the EU are broadly positive, whether in the form of the wider conception of social inclusion, the understanding of subsidiarity or the

implementation of anti-social dumping legislation as part of the Single European Act. Perhaps more than ever since 1945 the Brexit referendum result demonstrates why civil society and public discourse are needed to ensure that welfare is seen as a collective good. It would seem welfare matters both for society but also in the long term for the British polity as well.

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