

# Workfare, unfair

**F**ormer Secretary of State for Work and Pensions James Purnell quit the cabinet dramatically last month and called for the resignation of the Prime Minister. However, James Purnell's toxic political legacy is the Welfare Reform Bill, which is being debated in the House of Lords. LAG is calling on the government to rethink its policies towards benefits claimants, not least because the boom times in which the bill was conceived are over (although unjustly penalising unemployed people, as the bill proposes, cannot be justified whatever the economic circumstances).

According to an analysis of official statistics by the Trades Union Congress, on average, there are ten jobseeker's allowance (JSA) claimants for every jobcentre vacancy across the UK. With reports that the unemployment figures are likely to climb, jobless people are going to face even stiffer competition for the few jobs available. This is hardly the time for the government to be bringing in compulsory work-experience schemes for long-term unemployed people, but the introduction of American-style 'workfare' measures is the centrepiece of the Welfare Reform Bill. LAG believes that the schemes are demeaning and unfair. If the proposal as drafted in the bill went ahead, people would be paid as little as £1.73 per hour, ie, £4 less than the current national minimum wage rate for adult workers aged 22 and over. LAG believes that most unemployed people would be better off devoting their time to applying for the few jobs there are, rather than being forced to work for wages that undercut the national minimum.

LAG suggests that making people work for their benefit should not be compulsory, and any work done should be paid at the level of the minimum wage. We also question whether the government has the resources to administer such a compulsory 'work-for-your-benefit' scheme. As a result of draconian cuts in the Jobcentre Plus service in recent years and the further contracting out of services to support unemployed people, which the bill also proposes, LAG believes that it will be difficult to establish the necessary bureaucracy and infrastructure to deliver the scheme.

Many newly-unemployed people must be disheartened by the

welfare benefits that their years of national insurance contributions give them, ie, JSA of £64.30 per week, while any other entitlement is subject to a means test. Successive governments have eroded contribution-based benefits to a level at which they have become meaningless, and the bill promises further tightening around conditions of entitlement. LAG calls for the restoration of the levels of these benefits, or at least a significant increase in statutory redundancy entitlement to cushion the blow of losing a job; statutory redundancy pay will be capped at a maximum of £380 per week from October 2009, whereas national average earnings are £479 per week.

The bill requires lone parents and partners of claimants with children as young as three to engage in work-related activity to be entitled to benefit. This provision has been criticised by many organisations including the Social Security Advisory Committee, which fears for the welfare of children as benefit cuts for non-compliance with work-related-activity conditions could impact on their health and education. The provision also fails to recognise the value to young children of full-time parenting.

LAG also believes that some provisions of the bill, if implemented, could be open to challenge under the Human Rights Act 1998. For example, the requirement for some claimants who are dependent on drugs or alcohol to undergo testing and treatment in order to be entitled to benefit could fall foul of the right to respect for private and family life, as could the requirement for unmarried mothers to disclose the identity of their child's father. LAG does not see how this will necessarily improve children's lives.

A general feature of the bill is an increase in the state's powers to intervene in people's lives without, it seems, recourse to the courts. Jobcentre Plus, and even the private companies to which job-training work is subcontracted, could be given power to impose sanctions on claimants who would not have an automatic right of appeal. So, for example, people with a disability might lose entitlement to employment support allowance if they were deemed not to have complied with work-related-activity requirements. Similarly, fathers who were behind with child maintenance payments could be at risk of losing their passport and driving licence through an administrative decision.

It seems to us that the Welfare Reform Bill abdicates the government's basic duty to assist people in these difficult times. Instead, the bill demonises the unemployed and is an attack on our civil liberties. LAG hopes that the bill will be amended substantially before receiving royal assent.

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