

## **“Benefits Broods”: The Cultural and Political Crafting of Anti-Welfare Commonsense**

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The benefit system has created a benefit culture. It doesn't just allow people to act irresponsibly, but often actively encourages them to do so (David Cameron, Conservative Prime-Minister, 2011)

We are not the party of people on benefits. We don't want to be seen [as], and we're not, the party to represent those who are out of work (Rachel Reeves, Labour Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions, in Gentleman, 2015)

### **Keywords**

**welfare state, welfare reform, neoliberalism, cultural political economy, benefits stigma, austerity**

### **Abstract**

In the aftermath of the global banking crises, a political economy of permanent state austerity has emerged, driven by and legitimated through a hardening anti-welfare commonsense. We argue that, while there is an excellent evidence base emerging around solidifying negative public attitudes towards welfare, critical policy studies needs to attend to the *cultural* as well as the *political* economies through which an anti-welfare commonsense is formed and legitimated. To this end, in this article we adopt a 'cultural political economy' (Jessop, 2010; Sum & Jessop, 2013) approach to examine the co-production of the Welfare Reform Act (2012), (and in particular the Household Benefits Cap element of this legislation), and the cultural and political crafting of “benefit brood” families within the wider public sphere, to examine the mechanisms through which anti-welfare sentiments are produced and mediated. Our analysis begins with the case of Mick Philpott, who was found guilty in 2013 of the manslaughter of six of his children. We will show how this case activated ‘mechanisms of consent’ (Hall et al. 1978: 214) around ideas of acceptable family

forms, welfare reform and parental responsibility. Through this case-study, we seek to demonstrate how anti-welfare commonsense is fundamentally dependent upon wider cultural representational practices, through which those who claim welfare come to be constituted as undeserving and morally repugnant, to the extent that the very concept of 'claiming welfare' is reconceived within the social imaginary as debauched. Figures such as 'benefits broods', we argue, operate both as *technologies of control* (through which to manage precariat populations), but also as *technologies of consent* through which a wider and deeper anti-welfare commonsense is effected.

### **Introduction: Anti-Welfare Commonsense**

It is difficult to remember from a contemporary perspective that the Keynesian welfare state was imagined by its original architects as a 'cradle to grave' safety-net for citizens: a 'welfare commons' of 'shared risks' which would function to ameliorate economic and social hardships, injustices and inequalities (see Timmins 2001; Lowe 2005; Glennerster 2007). The landmark publication of the Beveridge Report in 1942 saw people queuing outside government offices in their desire to get their hands on a copy of this blueprint for a new welfare state (Page, 2007: 11) and the report sold over 100,000 copies within a month of its publication. What this public excitement communicated was a deep and broad political and public desire for a new kind of social contract between citizens and state. As Pat Starkey notes, this idealized welfarist imaginary portrayed 'a unanimity of aspiration across class boundaries for the reconstruction of British society, with its best features intact and its recent economic difficulties and unemployment absent' (Starkey, 2000: 547). However, Starkey also reminds us that the welfare state was always a moral and disciplinary project, conditional upon certain kinds of ideal citizens and behaviours and grounded in classificatory distinctions between 'deserving' and 'underserving'. As Fiona Williams has extensively detailed, unequal social relations, not only of class, but of gender, 'race', disability, age and sexuality, have always underpinned 'welfare regimes, their outcomes, the organisation of labour [...] the delivery of services, political pressures and ideologies and patterns of consumption' (Williams 1994: 50). Indeed, what remains of the post-War welfare state today was indelibly shaped by struggles *against* disciplinary welfare regimes and against the forms of patriarchy and state-racism it reproduced. Nevertheless, writing in a context where democratic futurist welfare dreams have been consigned to history, when many forms of welfare

provisions are being cut, and those who claim benefits and entitlements have become deeply stigmatized, it is important to recall the powerful ideological commitment to welfare which transformed post-War British society. The transition to post-Keynesian welfare regime in the late 1970s has been well-documented in critical social policy studies (see for example Burrows and Loader eds. 1994; Jones and Novak, 1999; Ferguson, Lavalette and Mooney, 2002), with many noting that the Thatcherite assault on the welfare state, and the subsequent embrace of neoliberal policies by New Labour, has led to 'deepening inequalities of income, health and life chances [...] on a scale not seen since before the second World War' (Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2014: 9). One of the major characteristics of welfare reform from the 1970s onwards was the emergence of a consensus (across the political spectrum) that the welfare state was in 'a permanent crisis' (Langan, 1994: xi). Through this 'crisis lens' the welfare state was reimagined as fostering toxic forms of 'welfare dependency' amongst citizens, itself considered to have a stagnating effect on economic growth and national prosperity. In a stunning reversal of the 1940s welfare imaginary, 'welfare' came to be understood across a wide-range of political, social and cultural milieus as *a cause* of poverty and social problems: including 'inter-generational worklessness', drug dependence, anti-social behaviours, 'troubled families', teenage parenthood, crime and other 'social ills'. Indeed, the idea that a 'bloated' welfare state is responsible for the persistence of entrenched social problems 'has led to measures of reform and retrenchment which have provoked often bitter controversy in virtually every sphere, from hospitals to schools to social security benefits' (Langan, 1994: xi).

More recently, in the aftermath of the North Atlantic Financial Crisis (2008), a politics and policy of austerity has emerged across Europe, driven by global institutions such as the IMF in conjunction with state-governments. The British Coalition Government (2010-2015) responded to this crisis by implementing 'the deepest and most precipitate cuts ever made in social provision' (Taylor-Goodby, 2013: viii). An emerging body of evidence demonstrates that the most severe cuts to state welfare are to the benefits of working age families, notably women, children and disabled people<sup>1</sup>. As Taylor-Gooby argues, 'It is hard to avoid the impression that some [...] in government are seizing an opportunity to implement policies which deepen social divisions and undermine the contribution of common social provision [...] to social cohesion' (2013: viii).

### **A Cultural Political Economy Approach**

In this article, we will develop existing theoretical insights into the formation of post-Keynesian welfare regimes through an explicit focus on the *mechanisms* through which anti-welfare commonsense is legitimated. The question of ‘consent’, and the revitalisation of the related concepts of ideology and hegemony, have become areas of renewed focus in critical policy studies, as scholars try to make sense of the persistence of neoliberal political and economic imaginaries, and correlative modes of governmentality, in the wake of the 2008 North Atlantic Financial crises (see for example Jessop, 2010; Davies, 2011; Hall, 2011; Rehmann, 2013; Sum and Jessop, 2013, Newman, 2014; Schmidt and Thatcher 2014). As Vivien Schmidt and Mark Thatcher (2014) ask: why are neoliberal ideas so resilient in Europe’s political economy? This question is now urgent as since the financial crisis of 2008 and the failure (and subsequent ‘artificial’ resuscitation by state governments) of the core organs and institutions of financial capital, programmes of welfare reform are being significantly accelerated. As welfare programmes are cut, privatized and marketised it is increasingly unclear what elements of the British state welfare will remain.

As Bob Jessop argues, in order to understand the persistence and popularity of neoliberal ideas, and the idea that ‘there is no alternative’, we need to examine critically how neoliberal ideologies, such as an anti-welfare commonsense, are ‘anchored in (and help to anchor) specific social practices, organizational routines and institutions, and/or [are] partly constitutive of specific social identities in the wider society’ (Jessop, 2014: 355). To this end, Jessop (2010) (and see Sum & Jessop, 2013) set out a compelling case for forms of critical policy scholarship that combine ‘critical semiotic analysis’ and insights from ‘the cultural turn’, with orthodox political economy approaches drawn primarily from economics, sociology and political science. What Jessop recognizes is a need within critical policy studies for attention to the role of *culture* in the formation of economic and social imaginaries. As he notes:

[I]n emphasizing the foundational nature of meaning and meaning-making in social relations, [cultural political economy] does not seek to add ‘culture’ to economics and politics as if each comprised a distinct area of social life [but rather] stresses the semiotic nature of all social relations (2010: 337).

For Jessop then, a cultural political economy approach is concerned not only with how a neoliberal cultural imaginary provides ‘a semiotic frame for construing the world’ but also how such an imaginary actively contributes ‘to its construction’ (2010:

342). Jessop's intervention is highly redolent of an earlier period of British Cultural Studies, notably Stuart Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis* (1978). What Hall and his colleagues recognised is that the commonsense of public opinion is tacit knowledge – hard to pin down in the moment of its formation, often leaving no inventory once it has dissipated – but nonetheless the formation of such commonsense is central to hegemonic power. To examine the persistence and popularity of anti-welfare commonsense, we need to 'pin-down' how an understanding of welfare as 'the cause' of social problems, is mediated, reproduced and legitimated. That is, we need to examine the forms of 'sense-making' that anti-welfarism enables and produces, and the ways in which this sensibility is anchored in everyday belief-systems and practices. In what follows, we develop a cultural political economy approach to understanding the cultural 'mechanisms of consent' (Hall et al. 2013 [1978]: 207) through which public acquiescence to accelerated welfare reform is enabled and legitimated. What forms of 'coercion, consent and resistance' characterize the anti-welfare hegemony of the political present tense? (Davies 2011: 103). What 'mechanisms of consent' are deployed to secure such unprecedented levels of anti-welfare sentiment which legitimate the shift from welfarist to corporatist state formation; formations which exacerbate inequalities and punish vulnerable populations?

The focus of our analysis is one of the key figures of anti-welfare commonsense, 'the benefits brood' family. We focus in particular on the co-production of 'benefits broods' across cultural *and* political sites of mediation in 2013, when an intensive focus on particular kinds of families within the news media and popular culture became intertwined with debates about the Welfare Reform Act (2012), and specifically the Household Benefit Cap component of this Act, within the public sphere. We examine the ways in which 'benefits broods' came to function as a 'technology of consent' for a deeper political programme of welfare reform.

Our analysis begins with the case of Mick Philpott, found guilty in 2013 of the manslaughter of six of his children. We will show how this case activated 'mechanisms of consent' around ideas of acceptable family forms and welfare reform. This was spectacularly realised in April 2013 when the Chancellor George Osborne directly linked the Philpott case to excessively generous child benefit and welfare payments. Figures such as 'benefits broods', we argue, are culturally and politically crafted to play a central role in neoliberal policy formation, operating both

as *technologies of control* (through which to manage precariat populations), but also as *technologies of consent* through which an anti-welfare commonsense is effected.

### **Crafting Commonsense: The Philpott Case**

On April the 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013, a jury at Nottingham Crown Court found Michael Philpott guilty of manslaughter by setting a blaze at his home in Derby which took the lives of six of his children; thirteen-year-old Duwayne, ten-year-old Jade, nine-year-old John, eight-year-old Jack, six-year-old Jesse and five-year-old Jayden. Philpott had led a plot, along with his wife Mairead Philpott and friend Paul Mosley, to frame his ex-girlfriend Lisa Willis for arson. Philpott's objective appeared to be acquiring custody over their children. In sentencing Philpott, the judge, Mrs Justice Thirlwall, described his actions as "callous stupidity" (R -v- Philpott, Philpott & Mosley, 2013: 5). She described Philpott as a controlling misogynist and a "disturbingly dangerous man" who used violence and psychological abuse to dominate and control the women in his life. The legal judgement was very clear about the misogynistic abuse Michael Philpott had subjected his girlfriends and wife to, noting that Willis had fled to a women's refuge with her children and that Mairead was in "a form of enslavement" (ibid). The chief executive of Women's Aid<sup>ii</sup>, Polly Neate, described Philpott as a serial perpetrator of domestic violence and suggested that the case "lifted the lid" on domestic abuse (see Neate, 2013). However, the dimensions of gender-based violence that underpinned this case were erased in the media reporting.

The day after the verdict, it was not the 'domestic abuse' that took centre stage in the media narration of this tragic case, but rather the 'welfare abuse' apparently enacted by the entire Philpott family. The *Daily Mail*, for example, led with the headline 'Vile Product of Welfare UK' (April 3, 2012) and a family photograph of Philpott posing with his six dead children taking up the entire front page (Figure 1).

■ **Man who bred 17 babies by 5 women to milk benefits system is guilty of killing 6 of them**

■ **Revealed: His past of attempted murder, schoolgirl sex and rape claim**

■ **Social workers did nothing despite his boasts of sordid lifestyle on TV**

# VILE PRODUCT OF WELFARE UK



The family wiped out: Mick Philpott with the six children he killed in blaze

**HE treated his 17 sons and daughters like cash cows - generating a staggering benefits income of £60,000 a year.**

Yesterday, Mick Philpott remained shameless to the last. The drug-taking layabout, who embodies everything that is wrong with the welfare state, was still smiling even after being convicted of killing six

By **Andy Dolan** and **Paul Bentley**

of his children. Together with his wife Maureen and friend Paul Mosley, he plotted to set fire to the family home in an appalling attempt to frame Philpott's former live-in lover Lisa Willis. The deadly gamble was to save the six youngsters, blame Miss Willis, and win back custody of five children who had recently moved out of the cramped three-bedroom semi with her. A bigger

council house was also on the agenda. As the cynical trio were found guilty at Nottingham Crown Court of manslaughter, Philpott's sister-in-law, Bernadette Duffy, screamed: 'You murdering b\*\*\*\*\*. I knew it from day one.' Incredibly, the tragic Philpott children were not being regularly monitored by social workers despite dangerous living conditions and their father's notorious appearances on national television where he boasted of his sex-obsessed and benefits-funded

lifestyle. As an inquiry was launched into the case, it also emerged that: ■ 'Shameless Mick' faces a fresh police investigation for allegedly raping a woman who went on to bear one of his children.

■ He was jailed for trying to kill a schoolgirl lover stabbing her 37 times after she ended their relationship.

■ Philpott plotted to 'get rich quick' - turning funeral funds donated by the local community into Argos vouchers

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Figure 1, Front Page of the *Daily Mail*, Wednesday April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013 [photograph of cover taken by Imogen Tyler].

In the *Daily Mail* account, Philpott was motivated purely by economic greed. The *Daily Mail* narrates Philpott's plot as an attempt to restore the 'thousand pounds a

month of benefits' that Willis 'brought in' and to secure a bigger council house, and states that he treated his children as 'cash cows' (see Dolan and Bentley, 2013). This narrative quickly gained media traction and on April 4th The *Sun* ran an editorial titled 'In the Gutter', reflecting that:

It's hard to imagine a more repulsive creature than Mick Philpott, the lowlife *benefits scrounger* convicted of killing six of his children in a fire. And who paid for his disgusting lifestyle? We did. Philpott may be the dregs of humanity. But the welfare system helped him every step of the way. Thousands a month in handouts flowed into the council home [...] The more children he produced, the richer the State made him. He fathered 17 while dodging work and *sponging* off partners. He *grasped* every benefit going while *demanding* bigger council houses for his tribe. *Was such feckless greed what the founding fathers of the welfare state intended to promote?* (The Sun Says, 2013, our emphasis)

This *Sun* editorial advises the reader (and 'those who oppose welfare reform') of the 'lessons' of the case: 'when benefits are so generous, easily obtainable and dished out indiscriminately, they can debase humanity' (ibid.). In their Leader on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, *The Sun* made even more powerful implicatory comments about the alleged causal relationship between social security, child benefit levels and the Philpott case, concluding 'let's hope this is the last time the state unwittingly subsidises the manslaughter of children'. This final line was edited in later editions of the newspaper to read 'unwittingly subsidises a monster like Philpott'.

The positing of a causal relationship between excessive benefit levels and the manslaughter of the Philpott children was not restricted to reports in the tabloid press. On April 3<sup>rd</sup> the broadsheet newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* led with an article by Allison Pearson titled 'Mick Philpott, a good reason to cut benefits' and subtitled 'something has gone awry when skivers like Mick Philpott feel all-powerful and society cannot summon the moral will to say "No. Enough"' (Pearson, 2013). Pearson described the Philpott household as a 'child benefit farm' and concluded by asking: "if child benefit was stopped after the third baby, would so many have been born to suffer and die?" On April 4th, in an editorial titled 'Family Value', *The Times* described Philpott as a 'violent fool' who was 'milking the system' and whose 'reckless choices' were 'subsidised by the rest of the nation' (The Times, 2013). *The Times* leader concluded that it is time to 'look again' at proposals to limit or cap Child



Benefit payments to the first two children only, echoing calls made in the House of Commons as the Welfare Reform Bill (2012) was making its way through the parliamentary system.

A news media consensus was solidifying, in which the Philpotts had been adding children to their family, and had hatched an arson plot, in order to extract the maximum amount of welfare benefits from the state and to acquire a larger council house. A corresponding consensus was also consolidating, namely that the Philpott household was indicative of a corrupt benefits system, that was failing to inculcate individual responsibility in its citizens and which was encouraging particular kinds of large families to adopt a “welfare lifestyle”.

This consensus was amplified, and transformed into political capital, on April 4th 2013, with public remarks made by George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer and a key architect of the Welfare Reform Bill (2012). Osborne, who was on a tour of the Royal Crown Derby porcelain works, stated that:

Philpott is responsible for these absolutely horrendous crimes and these are crimes that have shocked the nation; the courts are responsible for sentencing him. But I think there is a question for government and for society about the welfare state - and the taxpayers who pay for the welfare state - *subsidising lifestyles like that*, and I think that debate needs to be had.

[Osborne cited in Tapsfield, 2013, emphasis added]

Prime Minister David Cameron later defended Osborne’s comments, insisting that ‘we should ask some wider questions about our welfare system, how much it costs and the signals it sends’ (in Mason and Dominiczak, 2013). He added that ‘welfare is only there to help people who work hard and should not be used as a “life choice” (ibid.). The expedient use of the Philpott case by politicians and policymakers, to legitimate and extend their commitment to welfare retrenchment, demonstrates a longer history of neoliberal experimentation, policy-making and thinking, whereby the underlying problem to be solved in post-industrial states is the ‘condition of “welfare dependency,” rather than poverty per se’ (Peck and Theodore, 2010: 196). These comments highlight the *cultural and political* formation of anti-welfare commonsense, via the production and proliferation of a particular figure, the ‘benefit brood’ family.

***Weaponising ‘benefit broods’: a cultural economy of disgust***

According to his biographer Janan Ganesh, George Osborne believes that it is important to 'weaponise policy' so it can be deployed for political ends (Ganesh, 2012). Writing in *The Daily Telegraph* in 2014, the journalist Isobel Hardman discussed 'the Chancellor's desire to "weaponise" welfare policy' (Hardman, 2014). We can clearly see how the Philpott case became 'weaponised' as part of an ideological arsenal in anti-welfare commonsense. Media commentators and politicians congregated around the Philpott case and positioned it as emblematic of a wider social problem of 'welfare dependency' and excessively generous welfare benefits. The amount of money coming into the Philpott household was repeatedly and forensically charted in the days and weeks following the conviction – and often wildly distorted. Pearson (2013) writing in *The Telegraph*, declared that the Philpotts received 'two thousand pounds plus a month in child benefit thanks to his extensive brood'; inflating the true figure by three times. Other estimates were less precise, but no less revealing: an editorial in *The Sun* on 4<sup>th</sup> April created a vision of easy money when stating that 'thousands of pounds a month in handouts *flowed into* the council house' (The Sun, 2013). The most widely reported figures were between fifty and sixty thousand pounds a year, but even this was soon revised up, using a crude taxation calculation. In a typical example, Mark Duell and Simon Tomlinson in the *Daily Mail* stated that Philpott 'claimed the equivalent of a £100,000 salary in benefits' (Duell and Tomlinson, 2013).

In becoming 'weaponised' in this way, the actual material and financial circumstances of the Philpott household income recede as the household comes to function as a figure of "welfare disgust". Philpott himself did not actually claim any benefits, and the itemised household income includes the wages that his wife and girlfriend earned as cleaners, family tax credits, housing benefits *and* child benefits. Similarly, the overcrowding of their three-bedroom semi-detached house (home to eight children and three adults) becomes overshadowed by the material possessions within it, such as the family snooker table, which are cast as symbols of opulence. We argue that the fabrication of the Philpott household as a 'child benefit farm' is not an incidental media caprice, but is part of a much broader cultural political economy of 'welfare disgust'.

The Philpotts are just one spectacular example of an abjectified large family, but the cultural economy of disgust within which this example is anchored, is expansive, capacious and multi-sited. The speed with which the Philpott conviction was re-

narrated, mediated and circulated within public culture reveals a broader pre-existing architecture of mediations around what we have called the 'benefit brood' family. 'Benefit brood' is a cultural figurations of disgust aimed at families which are deemed to have become 'excessively' large as a result of over-generous welfare entitlements; 'benefit brood' parents regarded as almost pathologically fertile in their desire to secure greater amounts of welfare payments by having more and more children. 'Benefit brood' narratives form a staple of disgust across news media, lifestyle and 'real life' magazines, and pseudo-documentary (reality) television such as the genre of 'poverty porn'. Indeed, 'poverty porn' television in particular has emerged as a crucial site for repetitive mediations of the 'benefit brood' family (see Jensen, 2014; MacDonald, Shildrick and Furlong, 2014; Allen, Tyler and De Benedictis, 2014). Tracking the movement of 'benefit brood' families across these different media sites, we see that *the same families* are constantly circulating through a cultural economy of disgust; from magazine exposé, to newspaper article, to television production, and back again (see for example the recycling of the same 'benefit brood' families in Platell, 2010; Sims, 2010; Peev, 2010; Chapman, 2010; Andrews, 2010; Jorsh, 2012; Chorley, 2014). Indeed, the Philpott family themselves had previously been part of this 'benefit brood' pseudo-celebrity circuit, having featured on television talkshow *Jeremy Kyle* and 'poverty porn' precursor *Ann Widdecombe Versus the Benefits Culture* (both 2007).

The explosion of media coverage around 'benefit brood' families is a process of orchestration whereby informal ideologies around deficient parenting, welfare dependency and abject fertility are managed. The production and repetition of 'revolting subjects' such as 'benefits broods' are a central mechanism through which anti-welfare commonsense is crafted (see Tyler 2013; Jensen, 2014). Through broader citations of large families as a 'welfare problem', the already-established 'disgust-consensus' around 'benefit broods' families was rapidly anchored to the Philpotts specifically. The receipt of state welfare, hitherto marked as disgusting, and now linked repeatedly to the manslaughter of six children, becomes powerfully weaponised and in turn shapes public perceptions around state welfare in general. In the comment sections, message boards and letters pages that accompany such 'benefit brood' mediations, we see the 'awakened lay attitudes' (Hall, 1978: 136) around welfare that are procured and crystallised through these representations. While a swell of revolted public opinion *appears* spontaneous, by approaching such figurations as in Hall et al.'s terms, 'structured in dominance', it is possible to discern the *social* and *political* formation of consent. The 'benefit brood' family provides what

Hall et al. term the 'lynch-pin of legitimation', referring to those orchestrations of public opinion which provide tacit support for an already-circulating commonsense ideology about the welfare state and welfare dependency.

'Benefits broods', along with the unemployed, irregular migrants, asylum seekers, come to function in this neoliberal order as 'national abjects' (Tyler, 2013), stigmatised figures who serve as "ideological conductors mobilised to do the dirty work of neoliberal governmentality" (Tyler, 2013: 9). Such national abjects are constituted and repetitively accumulated in and through their movement through a range of media, cultural, social and political sites, becoming over-determined and caricatured, and thus shaping perceptual realities at multiple levels of social interchange, organizing public opinion and inciting consent for welfare retrenchement.

Such orchestrations should, we argue, be seen as a cultural political economy of disgust, which operationalizes disgust as part of anti-welfare architecture. Such architecture, or commonsense, not only procures consent for welfare reforms, but also in the process transforms abject populations such as 'benefit brood' families, into lucrative and electorally potent political capital. The public comments made by Osborne, and supported by Cameron, are a powerful example of the weaponisation of (welfare reform) policy by political elites. By fuelling public hostilities towards populations imagined to be a parasitical drain on resources, these weaponised cases become 'capable of swaying voters and disabling opponents who find them impossible to argue against convincingly' (Ganesh, 2012).

### ***From the Nanny State to the Daddy State: the Household Benefits Cap***

It has been most encouraging to see how warmly the country has received our changes, particularly the £26,000 limit on families receiving benefits. The Philpott case was an eye-opener to many, highlighting that far too many people in this country are living a wholly immoral lifestyle on public finance, and we need to crack down on that.

(Gerald Howarth, HC Deb 2 May 2013 GC388)

In Britain it was under the New Labour Government (1997-2010) that the particular kinds of moral narratives about "problem families" and "poor parenting", which

dominate public culture today, first emerged. New Labour introduced punitive policies deployed to manage “failed citizen-parents” by limiting financial aid and inculcating “responsibility” for their own welfare by finding work (see Jensen and Tyler, 2013). Parents were addressed as “partners” in a joint project with the government to raise aspirational children. The welfare state was imagined across many policy documents and political speeches *as if itself* a parent in the enterprise of producing the citizens of tomorrow. In many ways the optimism with which children and families were placed at the centre of political projects was refreshing: in one of his many parenting refrains, Tony Blair declared that ‘children might be twenty per cent of the population but they are one hundred per cent of the future’ (Blair, 1999). At the same time, through the explosion of parenting intervention policies during this period a clear message emerged that deficit parenting was being practised by (some) families, who were wilfully “stuck” in bad habits and resistant to voluntary change (see for example DfES 2006 and 2007). Through intervening (by force if necessary) and transmitting the “right” skills, the state positioned itself as a “super nanny” who would remedy the social inequalities and divisions of the future (re)produced by families ‘unwilling or unable’ to effect change for themselves. The consequent hostilities incited by this policy momentum towards ‘poor parents’ was particularly vengeful in relation to certain groups: those who live on council estates, receiving income support benefits, in irregular work and single mothers (Gillies, 2007).

The epithet “the Nanny State” was gleefully attached to the New Labour government by its critics, referring to their alleged micromanagement, hectoring policy, bureaucracy and undermining of personal responsibility (see for example Huntingdon, 2004). Where the New Labour “nanny state” was positioned as an abject maternal figure, inducing dependence and creating ‘feminized’ (that is, weak) workforces and a bloated and ‘Broken Britain’ (see Hanock & Mooney 2013, Slater 2014), the current Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government has framed its welfare reform project as one that will withdraw “nanny state” succour and eradicate its associated pathologies. In austerity Britain, we are told, citizens need to “re-learn” the lessons of hardy resilience, independence, motivation and personal responsibility in order for the nation to be able to compete again on a global scale.

On the eve of the British General Election in 2010, Stephen Brien of the think-tank *The Centre for Social Justice* detailed the ‘lessons’ of a welfare Nanny State that would become central to effecting the Welfare Reform Act (2012). As he wrote:

Welfare dependency is one of the most pernicious problems facing modern Britain and its deprived communities. When William Beveridge was planning the welfare state, he spoke about the giant evil of idleness: not just a waste of economic potential, but of human potential too. The tragedy is that his welfare system has gone on to incubate the very problem it was designed to eradicate. It was intended to support those who were unable to work, or for whom there were no jobs. But the benefits system now actively discourages people from taking a job, or working more hours. For millions, welfare dependency is now a way of life (Brien, 2010)

Loïc Wacquant argues that since the 1970s, liberal democracies of the global North have sought to transform from Keynesian 'Nanny States', to authoritarian 'Daddy States' (Wacquant 2010). This shift, he argues, is characterised in policy by 'the new priority given to duties over rights, sanction over support [and] the stern rhetoric of the "obligations of citizenship"' (Wacquant, 2010: 201). The current Coalition government have explicitly positioned themselves as the 'Daddy State' inheritors and architects of tough welfare reform that the 'Nanny State' New Labour government were unable to effect. This repositioning seems to have been successful, at least if we consult the hardening of public opinion towards unemployed people since the Coalition government was formed in 2010 (see Gooby-Taylor, 2013; Hills, 2015). One of the most enthusiastic embracers of the Daddy State rhetoric has been the Work and Pensions Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, the architect of a matrix of welfare reforms that he has proudly described as "aggressive" (Duncan-Smith, 2013). Indeed in overseeing the Welfare Reform Act (2012), Duncan-Smith has positioned himself as the saviour of the welfare state, claiming that the previous Labour government 'spent thirteen years letting the rot set into the welfare state, and I am now busy putting things right' (Duncan-Smith, 2013). One of the most salient examples of the tough welfare reform policy, which has particular relevance to the moralised significance of work/worklessness and the figure of the 'benefits brood', has been the 'Household Benefit Cap' element of this Act.

As part of the Annual Spending Review in 2010 the Government announced its intention to cap total household benefits at £350 per week for a single person household and £500 per week for couples, with or without children, and single parent households. Households are exempt from the Cap if they move into paid employment. According to the Impact Assessment for the cap, the rationale for

these calculations is to “restrict the total amount of money a non-working household can receive to broadly the level of the average earned income of working households” (DWP, 2012) – currently around twenty-six thousand pounds a year. This new welfare regime also requires that unemployed claimants sign a personalised “claimant commitment” which sets out the requirements and conditionalities for receiving welfare benefits and the consequences of not meeting them (see DWP, 2013). Failure to comply with these commitments, decided upon by your ‘work coach’, results in sanctions (such as loss of benefits for a fixed period), in order to ‘incentivise’ claimants.

The Household Benefit Cap has antecedents in previous welfare policies, for example in the ‘wage stop’ of the Social Security Act 1966, whereby supplementary benefits for unemployed claimants *could* be reduced if their receipt would result in the total benefit payments exceeding the claimant’s ‘likely wage’. However, unlike the ‘wage stop’, which was administered under discretion and regularly reviewed, the Household Benefit Cap is comprehensive and inflexible. Most importantly, the ‘wage stop’ existed within a broader welfarist imaginary, whereas consent for the Household Benefit Cap has been consciously procured through anti-welfare commonsense. The Household Benefit Cap have been consistently legitimated via ‘the taxpayer in work’ and as ‘delivering fairness’ to the taxpayer, and to ‘hardworking families’. In so doing, the proponents of these anti-welfare policies dramatize a new classificatory politics around work/worklessness. Duncan-Smith has been a keen and consistent advocate for this substitution, giving several high-profile media interviews where he delineates between ‘hardworking families’ and ‘benefit brood’ families:

The benefit cap has addressed the ludicrous situation we were in where people were receiving far more in benefits than the *ordinary hardworking family* earns. It is not right that before we introduced it some families could *rake in* more than double the amount that the average taxpayer takes home. (Duncan-Smith, cited in Chorley, 2014, our emphasis)

One of the unusual aspects of the British Welfare state (in the European context), is that it is funded primarily through individual taxation, ‘rather than social insurance payments from employers, workers and government’ (Taylor-Gooby, 2012: 3). It is these financial arrangements that enable the ideological pitting of abstracted hardworking tax-payer against ‘benefits claimants’. As Winlow and Hall (2013) rightly point out, the resurgence of an abstracted ‘taxpayer’ in times of austerity redraws

common economic interests between low-wage earners and extravagantly paid elite, rather than between low-wage earners and/or benefits claimants . Such newly drawn equivalences work to generate hard divisions between ‘universal benefits’, (such as the National Health Service, school-age education and pensions), and selective benefits (such as unemployment and disability benefits) and to divide people ‘along a vampiric axis of blame for diminishing social resources’ under ‘conditions of heightened precarity across a large swath of the class spectrum’ (Tyler, forthcoming).

While one of the initial objectives for the Household Benefit Cap was ostensibly to ‘deliver fiscal savings’ (DWP, 2012), when the detail of such savings came under question, welfare reform architect Lord Freud appeared to change tack and insisted that the message being sent by the Cap ‘is a behavioural one much more than a cost-based one’ (HL Deb 23 November 2011 GC421). Indeed the vast bulk of households – three quarters – have lost £100 per week or less under the Household Benefit Cap; small amounts in the grander welfare scheme, yet for each family this may mean hardship, eviction, displacement from schools, social networks and family. The DWP has resisted Freedom of Information requests about families who have been capped by higher amounts, though much of those cases will be disproportionately connected to higher housing costs in London and the South East. Such a behaviourist policy agenda is concerned with disciplining families, rather than ‘fiscal restraint’ and the Household Benefit Cap is symptomatic of a wider “behaviourist turn” in policy formation, accompanied by an intensive social, political and media focus on “behaviourally recalcitrant” social groups (see Whitehead et al., 2011).<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, as Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn have documented, neoliberal governmentality increasingly involves ‘the recruitment of psychology/psychologists into monitoring, modifying and/or punishing people who claim social security benefits’ (Friedli and Stearn, 2013).

The Household Benefit Cap unravels, and effectively marks the end of state welfare grounded in assessed need, a shift that was described in the House of Lords by Lord Kirwood as ‘a direct and dangerous attack on entitlement and the concept of entitlement’ (HL Deb 21 November 2011 GC367). In our analysis, the cultural political economy of disgust serves to draw a veil over the dissolving of a rights-based understanding of state support for vulnerable populations, which was precisely the common, consensual basis of the creation of the welfare state in post-war Britain.<sup>iv</sup>



## **Conclusion: Combating Benefits Stigma**

Two recent influential accounts of the current accelerated round of welfare reform, Taylor-Gooby's (2013) *The Double-Crisis of the Welfare State and What We Can Do About It* and John Hills', *Good Times, Bad Times: The Welfare Myth of Them and Us* (2015) offer in-depth exegeses of the fracturing of consent for the welfare state. Drawing extensively on social survey data, these studies draw particular attention to the prevailing 'welfare myths' that underpin public support for the current round of welfare retrenchment. Hills, for example, argues that this welfare myth of 'them and us', has enabled the welfare state to be reimagined as an unaffordable system of provision for parasitical 'benefit dependent others'; those in poverty, disabled people, those living in social housing and/or receiving unemployment benefits. He details how programmes of cuts are legitimated by the myth that welfare provision disproportionately supports a minority population of 'economically inactive' people, rather than the 'mass services' of state provision from which the vast majority of citizens benefit.

The hardening of public attitudes towards working-age benefits claimants in particular, such as families living with poverty and disabled people, marks a significant shift in public attitudes towards the welfare state. During previous recession periods, public support *for* welfare provisions increased as poverty and hardship became visible in everyday lives. In contrast, during the most recent economic downturn, there has been demonstrable and growing public support for *cuts* to state welfare programmes for working-age people. This is striking in a period of stagnating wages, insecure work and zero-hours contracts, and in a context of diminishing real-terms welfare benefits, rising poverty and poverty projections amongst vulnerable groups, such as children and disabled people (see for example Jara and Leventi, 2014) and a well-evidenced increase of dependence amongst low-income groups on foodbanks and other charitable services to secure basic needs (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015).

In seeking to explain the ascendance of what we have termed an anti-welfare commonsense, Taylor-Gooby and Hill draw particular attention to 'evidence of escalating benefit stigma' (Taylor-Gooby, 2014: 35) and in 'the growing stigmatisation of poverty among people of working age' (Taylor-Gooby, 2014: 36). This is further supported by 'Benefits Stigma in Britain' (Baumberg, Bell and Gaffney, 2012), a major research study commissioned by the disability charity Turn2us, which details how claiming benefits has become increasingly stigmatized since the late

1990s, and more specifically how ‘the language and coverage’ of negative media depictions of benefits has substantially changed since 2008, with increasing emphasis on the deservedness of claimants and an increased reference to ‘large families on benefits, bad parenting, antisocial behaviour, people who have never worked or haven’t worked for a long time’ (Baumberg, Bell and Gaffney, 2012: 43).

We follow Hills’ observation that a central challenge for social policy thinkers is how to challenge the hegemony of a hardening anti-welfare commonsense. However, while Hill, Taylor-Gooby and the authors of ‘Benefits Stigma in Britain’ offer ample evidence for the *transformation* of public opinion, there is an absence of attention on precisely *how* (and by whom) this benefits stigma is produced and sustained. It is the contention of this article that what is required is more critical accounts of the *cultural mechanisms* through which mass consent for welfare retrenchment is procured. To this end, we have sought to demonstrate how “benefit brood” families condense a wide range of popular discontents with the welfare state, and have been configured and mobilised as emblems of a larger crisis of “welfare dependency”. We argue that this marks a shift from welfare imaginaries of the 1940s to the anti-welfare consensus of the political present tense. Such families form part of a wider cultural political economy of disgust used to dramatize ‘the giant evil of idleness’ (Brien, 2010) and provide an ideological apparatus to secure consent for a punitive forms of welfare conditionality. The Philpott case and its subsequent weaponisation by the architects of the Welfare Reform Act (2012), reveals the ways in which the crafting of ‘revolting families’ (see Tyler 2013), as opposed to small, fiscally autonomous, ‘hard-working’ families, is a central component of anti-welfare policy formation. Our central argument is these abject families are part of a wider and deeper cultural political economy, which has reshaped public understandings of the welfare state and incited consent for policies of impoverishment, such as the ‘Household Benefits Cap’ (2012). The task of a cultural political economy approach is to develop analytical tools ‘that allow for an understanding of these ideological inversions, displacements, and enemy-constructs’ (Rehmann, 2013: 4).

The emergence, mediation and circulation of stigmatising depictions of “benefits broods” is symptomatic of how the truths of neoliberalism, such as escalating levels of child poverty, are transformed through media rituals into ‘acceptable versions’ of the values ‘on which that cruelty depends’ (Couldry, 2008: 3). While there have been some interruptions and fractures in the statecraft shifts from protective forms of welfare towards penal workfarist regimes since the 1970s, broadly these shifts have

continued unabated, and in the current 'austerity' moment under Coalition government they have intensified.

In conclusion then, the cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare national abjects, by political and media elites highlights the need for critical policy research to be attentive to the intersections of cultural and political economies in the formation of an anti-welfare state consensus. If the progressive welfarist imaginary of the 1940s was grown through charitable and Government reports and publications, newspaper editorials and documentary films, then we need to pay critical attention to the mediating agencies that feed the public appetite for anti-welfarist reforms. Further, we need to attend to the struggles against this anti-welfare commonsense in the everyday lives of those effected by cuts to welfare provision. What is at stake is the future of the welfare state itself as 'cuts plus restructuring' combine to fatally undermine 'the political ideas and values supportive of an inclusive welfare state' (Taylor-Gooby, 2014: 36). Hills notes that, 'misperception...is now one of the central challenges for those making and debating social policies and their future' (2015: 267). In this article we have sought to explicate how 'misperceptions' about state welfare are crafted to legitimate an anti-welfare commonsense. Through the unpicking of these mechanisms of consent it becomes possible to fracture this neoliberal imaginary, and offer alternative visions of welfare futures.

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Figure 1, Front Page of the *Daily Mail*, Wednesday April 3rd 2013 (photograph of cover taken by Imogen Tyler).

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<sup>i</sup> See for example evidence collected by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014) and by the campaigning group Disabled People Against the Cuts [www.dpac.net.uk](http://www.dpac.net.uk)

<sup>ii</sup> Women's Aid describes itself as 'the key national charity in England working to end domestic violence' (Women's Aid Mission Statement, 2014)

<sup>iii</sup> See the work of, Rhys Jones, Jessica Pykett and Mark Whitehead (2011) whose account of 'soft paternalism' and behaviourist policy formation resonates with our concept of anti-welfare commonsense.