

The myth of inter-generational worklessness

Stephen Lambert *challenges government scaremongering*

The Government, especially Ian Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, should be ashamed of themselves for buying into all the scaremongering and 'moral panics' generated by some sections of the tabloid press about 'inter-generational unemployment' – in other words, the idea that joblessness is passed on culturally from one generation to the next.

Of course, there's always been a small minority who swing the lead and would rather live on benefits like their parents, sometimes working in the informal or 'black' economy. But the vast majority of the jobless want to work, and their parents and grandparents have been in paid employment. What life of luxury is there in living on £71 per week job-seekers allowance – which most unemployed people have paid into in any case through the national insurance system. In 1982 the Thatcher government scrapped what was then known as the 'earnings-related allowance', which topped up unemployment benefit. Job-seekers allowance was reduced from one year to six months and is the lowest social security benefit in Europe. Compare Germany and Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark, which pay up to 80 per cent unemployment benefit based on previous earnings. Yes, just like a private insurance scheme! Yet there's little real evidence of 'inter-generational unemployment' in these societies.

The Government's views are based on anecdotal and impressionistic assertions rather than any robust empirical evidence. Whilst official state figures (from the Office for National Statistics) show that about 17 per cent of households in the UK are workless (down from about 21 per cent in 1996), it is only in about 1 per cent of households that nobody has ever worked (and a significant proportion of this 1 per cent is likely to be made up of multi-occupancy student households).

Research by Byram in 2009 reveals that around 75 per cent of NEET (those not in employment, education or training) young people come from a household with at least one adult in paid work, and that the vast majority of those from currently

workless households are not from families with no history of employment.

Over the last six years, research conducted at Huddersfield University has engaged with over 70 young people classified as NEET or becoming NEET, including some of the most vulnerable people in society, such as care leavers, young offenders, teenage parents, school refusals and so on. Yes, many of their parents were currently jobless, but the research, based on qualitative methods, found that no jobless youngster came from a family with no history of paid employment.

Let's demolish the myths about inter-generational unemployment and get into a proper, serious debate about the nature, causes and impact of long-term unemployment amongst the young, middle-aged and old, such as poverty, physical and mental ill-health, social isolation and lack of confidence.

We need radical solutions to tackle youth joblessness, and a 'new deal for the over-50s', the 'neglected generation', most of whom bring a wealth of skills, experience and knowledge to the jobs market, but sadly are overlooked by some medium and large employers in the private – and even the educational – sector (with the notable exception of B&Q and Sainsburys), mostly based on age-based discriminatory attitudes and prejudice.

No wonder a small minority have been forced into self-employment! Some of these start-ups are growing, without any government support. All the best to them – but they need support from any responsible government if we're serious about achieving near-full employment.

But our contributory benefits system also needs to be overhauled, modelled on the western European system, to give the long-term jobless dignity and self-respect while out of work, in conjunction with proper retraining opportunities and secure employment.

The notion that the UK's 2.5 million unemployed are idle and feckless is a myth and needs to be challenged by serious policy-makers and politicians.