

## Counterpoint to the current Coalition Government: a *discourse of humanity* from our previous Coalition Government

### Abstract

I wrote this shortly after the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of what became known as the Beveridge Report. Having been born in the same year it strikes me that there are very few people living in the UK who are not, in one sense or another, *Children of Beveridge*. I believe that it is worth reflecting on this. The junior partner in our Coalition government might be discomfited if reminded that Beveridge was a Liberal MP. I can't see him in today's version of the party. I doubt, however, that it agonises over its lost moral purpose or laments its lack of such talent. Just before Christmas 2012 Nick Clegg presented his party as of the centre. While his reason for doing so was clearly to imply that the Conservatives are of the right Clegg's 'centre' is far more to the right than that of his predecessors.

### Main text

I recently acquired a second hand copy of *Full Employment in a Free Society* (1944) by Sir William Beveridge who, two years earlier had given us the more famous Beveridge Report that became the basis for the post war welfare state. It took me back to old Dr. Sytner who practised on Boundary Street in the Scotland Road area of Liverpool. The bombsite opposite his surgery (long since pulled down) remains unrestored. The school I taught in during the 70s was almost opposite. Helen who was in my class was doing a project on poverty. The project, like so many carried out in our school, was also designed to contribute to a set of programmes to be broadcast on Radio Merseyside, which meant that, once it became technical, I could get more involved.

So we went to see Dr. Sytner<sup>i</sup> because he had worked in the area for so long. What, we wanted to know, could he tell us about pre-war community spirit? He was having none of that bromide. 'It was', he said, 'a community of poverty'. He recalled a time and place of 'want', 'squalor', 'disease', 'ignorance', 'distress' and 'inequality': almost identical to the 'giant evils' of Beveridge's book and his earlier report. A time when people without the money to visit a doctor or buy medication would treat a child's sore throat by wrapping round its neck a sock soaked in urine. A time of horse drawn carts, streets full of manure alive with flies that then flew onto your food. There were no fridges or freezers.

It was also a time and place of casual labour<sup>ii</sup> and, being close to the docks, subject to extremely heavy bombing. Our school logbook recorded the last severe winter of the war when teachers went round the homes gathering in children because there was heating to be found in the school. Their mothers had sent them out scouring the gutters to see if any coal might have fallen off the coal wagons. Page after page of that logbook was full of the names of children that had left early because of ill health. In 1948, when the NHS began and those children became entitled to free medication, the next pages were, dramatically so, blank.

Reading Beveridge now is to go back to a time when it was very difficult to construct, articulate and propose values that would prolong or make worse social misery, although Churchill's Conservative Party did their best to oppose

the introduction of the NHS and were generally speaking against any redistribution of wealth. The moral momentum of the time was with the Labour Party and the then very small Liberal Party. Beveridge actually became a Liberal MP for a short while. And Beveridge's *free society*, in which he felt we should and could have full employment, was nothing like the free market economy desired in 1979 by Margaret Thatcher or today by George Osborne. It was the freedom for which tens of millions of people were dying, being bombed, losing their homes and being displaced. It was the freedom to live in a democracy that treated people fairly. To use a word that in those days we were not afraid of using: we wanted to live in a 'civilised' country. Who now asks what it means to live in a civilised country? Our current government?

I do not intend here to write a review of Beveridge's book, to do that I would have to delve into a lot of detailed economics. The major point to make is that here was a coalition government which, despite including a number of social reactionaries, and despite facing financial, economic and military problems of a magnitude that shrinks into insignificance the problems of our present coalition government, knew that the needle of its moral compass had to point towards a more equal, a more fair and a more fulfilling society. The text below the title of the book is

***“Misery generates hate”<sup>iii</sup>***.

### Questions for critical conversations

1. Would it be possible today to begin a discourse of humanity?
2. What would a humane educational system look like?
3. What would have to change to make it happen?
4. Do enough people want it?
5. In terms of government priorities to what extent do you feel that invading Afghanistan and Iraq, light touch financial regulation, the renewal of our Trident fleet, the encouragement of casino banking and special tax concessions for big corporations were and are more important than maintaining the NHS, Sure Start, Every Child Matters and abolishing tuition fees?

### Notes, references and links

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<sup>i</sup> If anyone is interested in the history of Jazz in Liverpool, Merseybeat and the Cavern Dr. Sytner's eldest son was Alan who began the Cavern.

If anyone is interested in British saloon car racing you might wish to look up his other son, Frank.

<sup>ii</sup> Casual labour now goes by the name of zero hours contracts. I suppose the idea is that if you change the name you can avoid the blame for alienating and commodifying people.

<sup>iii</sup> For the origin of the phrase this link should help.  
<http://oecdinsights.org/2011/08/09/in-praise-of-the-luddites/>

In order to critique the above you may find the following link useful.  
<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.doc>

