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Book Reviews

R. Lupton, T. Burchardt, J. Hills, K. Stewart and P. Vizard (eds.) (2016), *Social Policy in a Cold Climate: Policies and their consequences since the crisis*, Bristol: Policy Press, £25.99, pp. 394, pbk.
doi:10.1017/S0047279417000137

This is the third volume in a series documenting and analysing developments in social policy since 1997 from the LSE's Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion. Like its predecessors this volume, which covers the period 2007–2015, is an essential addition to the bookshelves of anyone who studies or is involved in UK social policy (although post-devolution some chapters refer to England alone). The editors accurately describe its purpose: 'as a wide-ranging yet detailed reference guide for students of social policy, policy-makers and opinion formers and "ordinary voters" who want to look behind the claims and counter-claims made through the media to gain a fuller understanding of the actual policies pursued and their consequences' (pp. 2–3). However, as they emphasise in a number of places, any evaluation of consequences and outcomes of the Coalition government's policies is necessarily provisional because of data lags.

As in the previous volumes there is a particular focus on distributional effects. Given the 'cold climate' of the title, more specifically this has meant an evaluation of the extent to which social policy has helped to mitigate the impact of deficit reduction on those with the narrowest shoulders. To this end the first part provides a detailed analysis of the policy areas of: income maintenance and direct taxes; young children, education, employment policy, housing, health and adult social care. (I should here perhaps declare an interest – as a Labour peer I've been involved in opposing some of the policies covered.) The second explores two broad cross cutting themes: the shifting role of the state and various dimensions of inequality – socio-economic, spatial and those arising from the social divisions of gender, age, ethnicity and disability.

The chapter on tax-benefits policy starts with a reminder of the different meanings now attributed to 'welfare' – from the welfare state as a whole to a stigmatising US-influenced synonym for social security for people of working age not in work. Unfortunately, there is a lack of consistency in the book's own use of the term (a minor cavil). The analysis brings out the regressive nature of the Coalition's policies in this area although the authors rightly point out that the conclusions reached are sensitive to which year is taken as the base year. All too often the Coalition in effect claimed credit for the effect of changes attributable to the Brown government. The protective role during and after the recession of the social security and tax credits systems inherited from Labour is clear. A particularly telling point in relation to the Coalition's policies is that cuts to benefits and tax credits in effect met much of the cost of the regressive increase in personal tax allowances even though they were presented as essential to deficit reduction.

In view of the Coalition's regressive tax-benefit policies John Hills and Kitty Stewart observe that it 'is something of a surprise' that income inequality and relative poverty 'remained flat between 2012/13 and 2013/14' (p. 253). It would have been useful to have had some discussion as to possible reasons for this. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies the answer lies in a

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'combination of strong employment growth and weak individual earnings growth... despite falls in benefit income' (Belfield et al, 2016: 35). Whether these trends will continue to outweigh the effects of a further round of benefit cuts introduced by the Conservative government remains to be seen. As the concluding chapter warns, with a four year freeze in most benefits, 'what happens to the inflation rate will be critical' (p. 333). Post-Brexit the signs are ominous.

Despite the focus on distributional impact, an important recurrent theme is the changing role of the state in relation to the provision of welfare (in the broader sense of the term). This is explored explicitly in a chapter on public and private welfare and again in the conclusion, with reference not just to spending but also to forms of provision, degree of regulatory control and user choice. The overall verdict for most areas is a picture of continuity with existing trends – albeit an acceleration in some cases – rather than sharp change. Particularly striking is the extent to which social care is now not just provided but also often funded privately with implications too for the demands made on unpaid informal care. Linking this chapter back to the central question of distributional impacts, Tania Burchardt and Polina Obolenskaya suggest that, whatever one's views of the respective merits of public, private or voluntary sector provision, 'our increasing dependence on non-redistributive, individually financed welfare' in the context of current levels of income and wealth inequalities 'must be a cause for concern' (p. 242).

In the concluding chapter, the editors suggest that whatever the outcomes of the Coalition's policies, 'there is no doubt' that they represented an attempt 'to reform, in fundamental ways, the role of state and private interests in social policy'. This, they suggest, may ultimately prove to be its 'biggest legacy' (p340). As a result they warn that 'across a series of risks and life events from the early years to care needs in old age, more people will face those risks on their own. The already cold climate for much of social policy and many of those affected by it looks likely to become colder still'. It is difficult to quarrel with this pessimistic conclusion. However, it did throw into relief for me the absence of any discussion of the implications of social policy developments for (in)security or precarité (see Orton 2015). Perhaps the next volume will address this – and I hope very much there will be a next volume because through this series CASE performs an invaluable service for the rest of us.

References

Belfied, C., Cribb, J., Hood, A., Joyce, R. (2016), *Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2016*, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Orton, M. (2015), *Something's Not Right*, London: Compass.

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Hugh Bochel and Martin Powell (eds.) (2016), *The Coalition Government and Social Policy*, Bristol: Policy Press, £26.99, pp. 304, pbk.
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The days of the coalition government feel long gone; David Cameron and Nick Clegg's political embrace in the Downing Street Rose Garden a fading memory. The Conservatives are alone in power; Cameron has exited the Westminster stage; and the Liberal Democrats having haemorrhaged votes and seats are back on the left.

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