Right-wing think tank revives “idleness” slur, demands Labour “finish the job” of cutting welfare

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Britain’s Labour government is preparing a massive assault on the welfare state, targeting the disabled, the sick and the young. Its spearhead is a review of “Young People and Work”, due Tuesday, which proposes stripping under-25s of their sickness and disability benefits.

Milburn, a Blairite former Labour health secretary, trailed its main proposal in an interview with the *Times*. Under-25s would be barred from claiming the health element of Universal Credit or the Personal Independence Payment (PIP—the main disability benefit) and instead be placed on a new “youth allowance” paid at the standard Universal Credit rate.

Young people who fail to engage with the scheme would risk losing part of the allowance. Milburn declared, “A deal isn’t a deal unless there are potential consequences,” warning, “Candidly, it could mean that some people will get less financial support.”

Backing Milburn, Prime Minister Andy Burnham said his government is “ready to grasp the nettle.” Burnham came to office pledging he would not be “squeamish” about cutting welfare costs, on the understanding it was necessary to pay for a sharp rise in military spending.

In his October 28 budget speech, Chancellor John Healey reaffirmed the target of increased military spending to 3 percent by 2030 and 3.5 percent by 2035—overall to 5 percent including related infrastructure spending. “There will be a reduction in the benefits bill,” he reassured the House. Healey declared that Milburn’s review, and a parallel review of disability benefits by another Blairite, disability minister Sir Stephen Timms—due to report next month—would be critical to further welfare cuts.

The ideological ground for this offensive has been prepared by a sustained campaign in the right-wing media and think tanks, vilifying those unable to work, the sick, disabled, and youth not in education, employment or training (NEETs) claiming benefits.

Last month, the right-wing UK think tank Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) published *State of Dependency*, part one of its “Welfare 2030” inquiry, which aims to restructure the welfare system by the end of the decade. Its subtitle is “How a broken benefit system is holding Britain back.”

The report argues that the welfare state, founded after the Second World War, has led to “Broken Britain.” It says that blame for “two decades of stagnant growth” lies with the rising welfare bill, with £1.6 trillion spent on working-age benefits—“over £1.1 trillion more than its capital investment on transport, science and technology, and housing combined.”

Such talk of investment is a ruse for a more immediate aim: freeing up massive funds for rearmament. In March this year, the CSJ said in a statement that the “increase in welfare spending this year alone is equivalent to 15 advanced Royal Navy frigates, 220 fighter jets, or 250,000 soldiers’ salaries, more than three times the size of the regular British Army.”

The rise in welfare spending, “driven by soaring sickness and disability claims as well as increases to pensions and benefits, is adding fresh pressure to the public finances just as defence chiefs warn Britain must rearm in an increasingly dangerous world,” said its statement. The CSJ calculated that getting one million people into work would raise £18 billion a year—“enough to fund the entire increase needed to raise defence spending to 3 per cent of GDP”—and called for mental health benefits to be “tightened to more severe cases” and for certain benefits for under-22s to be scrapped.

The CSJ was founded by Sir Iain Duncan Smith, Conservative Party leader from 2001 to 2003. Its 2007 report, *Breakthrough Britain*, identified the causes of poverty as “educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.” Its antidote to the social problems produced by capitalism, outlined in its latest report, are that “Work matters”; “savings matter”; “Stable families matter” (*State of Dependency*, 4.3 and 4.5).

The record of the report’s chair shows what this means in practice. Duncan Smith gained notoriety as Work and Pensions Secretary (2010-2016) in the five-year Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, which implemented savage austerity. He designed and implemented the hated Universal Credit (UC), which merged six benefits into one, subjecting claimants to brutal sanctions, delays and destitution.

The report holds up the government’s “age of austerity”, introduced following the global financial crash, as the model governments should emulate. Duncan Smith writes in the foreword about his government’s welfare cuts in 2010-2019, equal to “£28 billion” in today’s terms, asserting “It worked,” and “We must now find the courage to finish the job.”

The human cost of “the job” in that decade was harrowing. A study published in October 2022 found 334,327 excess deaths from 2012-2019 in England, Wales and Scotland, attributed to austerity. Trussell Trust food parcels rose from almost 26,000 annually in 2008/09 to over 1.33 million in 2017/18. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the poorest 10 percent of households with children suffered a loss of income of approximately £4,000 a year during 2010-2019.

A study of 149 English local authorities (*Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 2016) found that for each extra 10,000 people reassessed under the Work Capability Assessment in 2010–13, there were six more suicides, 2,700 more self-reported mental health problems and 7,020 more antidepressant prescriptions. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities concluded in November that year: “the threshold of grave or systematic violations of the rights of persons with disabilities has been met”.

The same ideology runs through Chapter 5 of the CSJ’s State of

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Dependency. It's "Broken Britain" second part has a section "Worklessness (Idleness)", echoing the Beveridge report of 1942, which laid the foundations of the post-war welfare state. William Beveridge identified "Five Giants": Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. Beveridge's report departed from the Victorian notion that poverty was an individual moral failing, and idleness meant lack of opportunity to work, not laziness.

The CSJ purloins the language of the welfare state's founding document to argue for its dismantling. Its tone harks back to the Victorian Poor laws with its distinction between the deserving and "undeserving" poor. Economic inactivity, it asserts, is "chronic in benefit Britain", with undeserving claimants cast as "hidden unemployment." A new concept is introduced: "medicalised worklessness."

Welfare is presented as a barrier to fulfilling lives through work, with the idle workless stuck in the "benefit trap" while immigrants take jobs in construction, logistics, retail and hospitality. "Employers have gained unprecedented access to overseas labour", while "taxpayers have absorbed the growing cost of domestic worklessness."

In an entrenched low-wage economy, it is a myth that employment is a way out of poverty. Official figures show 13.4 million people in the UK were in relative poverty after housing costs in 2024/25, and around 68 percent (5.2 million) of working-age adults in poverty lived in households where at least one person was in work. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's cost of living tracker (summer 2026) found that 62 percent of low-income households—7.4 million families—had been unable to afford at least one essential item in the previous six months, the highest number since the survey began in 2021. The increase was fastest among households not receiving means-tested benefits.

The report is stuffed with statistics designed to alarm and divide, suggesting society's wealth is wasted on work-shy scroungers. It notes that the Department for Work and Pensions pays out £309.5 billion annually, "more than the budgets for defence, education and policing combined"—while not addressing that State Pension spending, along with other pension-age benefits, accounts for 57 percent of the total welfare budget.

The CSJ complains that a claimant on UC health, housing support and the enhanced level of Personal Independence Payment—a benefit helping with extra costs of living with a mental or physical disability—can receive £27,400 annually, while 6.2 million full-time workers take home less. This only confirms that successive governments, in collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy, have presided over a low-wage economy.

The CSJ's primary aim is to gut sickness benefits, PIP and the UC health component. "We reject the view that mental health conditions are inherently incompatible with employment"; the "low rate of unemployment obscures the rise of medicalised worklessness." "Worklessness," the report asserts, "appears not primarily as 'unemployment' … associated with cycles of boom and bust, but rather as 'incapacity'."

PIP, the main target, is a non-means-tested benefit and qualifying to receive it is a mammoth task. Those rejected can wait up to 12 months to appeal if they fail to qualify. Over two-thirds (67 percent) win at tribunal. Under Burnham's predecessor Keir Starmer, moves to further restrict PIP were shelved in July 2025 due to backbench opposition prompted by fear of a huge social backlash.

The CSJ laments the costs of rising numbers of children diagnosed with ADHD and neurodevelopmental issues. "In 2025/26, the DWP spent over £5.3 billion on CDLA [Disability Living Allowance for Children], … Expenditure has almost doubled in real terms since 2019/20," it writes. Disregarding the suffering and stress young people endured at the height of the COVID pandemic, and the overall lack of opportunities, it states, "NEET rates have shot up since 2021, now equating to over one in eight young people" as "A new generation is being drawn into dependency".

The suggestion that youth are content with a life on benefits is belied by the mass Gen Z demonstrations sweeping Europe and internationally, demanding decent education, graduate jobs and a future free of climate despoliation, police oppression and war. The report's own figures show that 76 percent of the 300,000 young people outside education and work who gave no reason for being "economically inactive" (the CSJ's "other" NEETs) "were not claiming any benefits in 2025."

Last month Burnham promised every young person a "high-quality technical pathway, work placements, apprenticeships and the skills and experience they need to secure a good job," with "timely, high-quality mental health support". This is offered in place of a university education that tuition fees and the rising cost of living are putting ever further out of reach, leaving it increasingly a route open only to the children of the wealthy.

For everyone else, the promise means schemes like Sainsbury's "Modern Work Experience Programme", promoted by Burnham, under which the supermarket chain would use 10,000 young people as unpaid labour. Behind the promise of pathways lies the threat in Milburn's plan: under-25s stripped of health benefits and placed on a paltry, temporary "youth allowance".

Politicians of all stripes and a frothing media are pushing for welfare spending to be redirected to the military. In a pre-Budget speech on October 20, Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch complained that the extra spending needed to reach the pledged 3 percent of GDP on military spending by 2030 was "less than a third of the increase in welfare since Labour came to office."

Endorsing the CSJ report, the *Telegraph* gave Duncan Smith an op-ed two days before publication. He wrote, "We can't allow another generation to inherit a life of dependency". The welfare system was "an economic opiate", with "systemic bias in HM Treasury towards low-skilled migrant labour". Relishing the opportunity to push its anti-immigrant agenda, the Tories' house organ claimed that non-British nationals accounted for around four-fifths of the net rise in payroll jobs since 2014, citing Duncan Smith's accusation that ministers have "repeatedly pulled the easy lever of immigration."

The *Times* is running its own six-month "welfare inquiry" led by Fraser Nelson, a former editor of the right-wing *Spectator*, pushing for "radical action on pensions and welfare". A *Sunday Times* editorial launching the campaign on October 11 declared that Burnham "must be the prime minister who finally stops kicking the can down the road. The time to act is now." Nelson also endorsed the TaxPayers' Alliance "Benefits Bill" postcode tool, designed to demonise those on benefits as the cost of living for millions worsens. The tabloid *Sun* lauded a "clever tool" uncovering "benefits hotspots."

With Milburn due to report on Tuesday, Timms to follow next month and Healey having pledged welfare cuts next year, the assault on the sick, disabled and young is shifting from right-wing think tanks to government policy. This assault will generate enormous opposition among young people in Britain. Defeating the government's brutal measures means building a working-class movement across Europe and internationally against war and the billionaire oligarchy, for socialism.

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