The Beveridge Report and Its Implementation:
a Revolutionary Project?

Noel Whiteside

The Beveridge Report is widely regarded as the foundation stone of the post-war British welfare state. Of all social reform proposals put forward in various countries during the 1940s, it is easily the best known. Indeed, its publication put its author on a plinth of fame among social reformers matched only by that of Otto von Bismarck, whose reputation remains somewhat more sullied. Comprehensive and popular, the Beveridge Report claimed to offer all citizens protection as of right "from the cradle to the grave", thereby abolishing the hated household means tests that had characterised public relief in Britain during the Slump years of the 1930s. Its publication was met with a euphoric reception: queues at the government bookshop signalled the eventual sale of half a million copies, outselling any official report on any topic to date. In spite of severe misgivings on the part of Prime Minister Churchill, Treasury officials, many Cabinet members and nearly all Conservative MPs, it was received rapturously by the press and public. A shortened version was distributed by the Ministry of Information to British troops to foster morale in the immediate aftermath of El Alamein, the first British victory in North Africa. The report’s reception turned its author into a public hero virtually overnight: it influenced post-war debates on social reform all over Western Europe and across the English-speaking world. Its adoption by the Labour Party fostered the latter’s electoral success in the immediate aftermath of the war. Between 1946 and 1951, a wide range of welfare measures, including universal social insurance and a National Health Service (NHS) free at the point of delivery were introduced. Contemporary social policy writers such as T.H. Marshall argued that such measures represented the culmination of social citizenship rights in Western Europe and had, by removing the risks associated with industrial capitalism, created a democratic and viable alternative to Soviet communism.

The Beveridge Report thus certainly achieved a very positive reputation, both at the time and since. In attacking his famous five giants of Want, Idleness, Disease, Squalor and Ignorance, Beveridge claimed to offer all citizens protection at subsistence level to guarantee the elimination of poverty. ‘Beveridgean’ welfare has subsequently become firmly associated in social policy literature with tax-funded, redistributive social support and flat-rate benefits in contrast to ‘Bismarckean’

---

1 The author would like to thank Claire Andrieu and two anonymous referees for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper, but takes full responsibility for the opinions expressed in this revised version.
2 Social Insurance and Allied Services, Parliamentary Papers Cmd. 6404/1942, London, HMSO.
schemes based on earnings-related benefits and contributions that reinforce established social structures. The lineages of the 'Beveridgian model' are now well rooted in social policy debates around the world, perpetuating the radical reputation won by its author during the war and its immediate aftermath. In 1992, an international conference held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the report’s publication attracted over 500 people – the vast majority of whom still regarded Beveridge as a reforming hero whose report had laid down the fundamental principles of a welfare state and set them in stone for all time.

In Britain itself, much of the acclaim that greeted the report in the 1940s can be ascribed to its promise to provide benefits "as of right" to all contributors, removing the threat of means-tested assistance. A note of explanation is required. Social assistance in Britain owed its origins to the 1834 Poor Law which, operating on principles of deterrence, originally required claimants to be incarcerated in the local workhouse where families were split up and those capable of work were subject to hard labour. This voluntary imprisonment endowed the "pauper" with a social status similar to that of the convicted criminal. Throughout the nineteenth century, respectable working people went to considerable lengths to avoid the taint of pauperism and the social disgrace that invariably accompanied any claim to public relief. In the early twentieth century, the principle of incarceration was abandoned in favour of (cheaper) means-tested assistance, but the disgrace of applying for relief did not diminish and continued to discourage claims for public assistance well into the late twentieth century. The promise to abolish means tests was thus widely popular.

While accorded massive acclaim in the press and credited by contemporaries for generating the political support that secured the 1945 general election for the Labour Party, Beveridge’s reputation subsequently became more mixed. His report attracted critics from all sides of the political spectrum. From the left it has been attacked for failing to abolish poverty or promote equality, for advocating contributions that were a regressive tax on the low paid, for offering those permanently unable to work (through mental or physical incapacity) nothing at all and for neglecting the needs of married women. On marriage, if wives continued to work, they could only claim 75 percent of unemployment or sickness benefit and their own pension contributions could only earn them 40 percent more than wives who did not work or contribute – thereby negating Beveridge’s own insurance principle that benefit rights must be based on contributions – as wives’ pension rights remained based on their husbands’ contributory record. His construction of social citizenship has subsequently been extensively criticised as strongly gendered.

---

5 Jose Harris, "Beveridge’s Social and Political Thought", in Hills et al., Beveridge and Social Security, op. cit., p. 24.
Criticised by feminists and the left, Beveridge became subject to criticism in the 1980s by right-wing historians as a sentimental idealist whose grandiose ambitions were basically inoperable and should be held accountable for Britain’s post-war economic decline. In Corelli Barnett’s account, Beveridge stands guilty of diverting Britain’s scarce post-war resources to unprofitable doles instead of allowing them to be dedicated to reconstruction and economic modernisation. Moreover, his welfare state must be held responsible for corrupting the mass of the British people, increasing dependence on social support and undermining incentives to work, thereby contributing to national economic decline. More nuanced accounts, notably Jose Harris' well-known biography and more general histories of both the war and post-war welfare developments, offer a balance between these extremes and have tended to emphasise that, for good or ill, the impact of Beveridge on British welfare legislation passed after the war was more limited than has sometimes been supposed.

Such debates about Beveridge's reception in Britain cannot, however, detract from his impact on welfare politics in a large number of western democracies in Europe and across the English-speaking world, generating a vast literature that cannot possibly be summarised here. One might wonder, however, how many of Beveridge's supporters actually read his (rather dull) report: it has, for example, only very recently been translated into French. The brief review presented here will focus on the report’s actual contents to argue, in agreement with much recent historical judgement, that Beveridge was less of a visionary than is sometimes assumed and his work requires re-siting in its historical context for its ‘revolutionary’ nature to be understood. With this in mind, the first section of this paper will look at the content of the report to assess its innovatory aspects, the second will re-assess its influence on the legislation passed by the post-war Labour government. The final section will offer some conclusions. It is important from the start to appreciate that Beveridge’s own ideas should be set within the lineages of British liberalism that pre-date the Second World War. It is only by placing his proposals within the presuppositions of liberal welfare debates that we can assess the ‘revolutionary’ nature – or intent – of the report’s contents.

Towards the Beveridge Report: Social Insurance and Allied Services

A summary of Beveridge’s working life demonstrates his familiarity with British schemes of social security that predated his famous report. Following an early career as a civil servant in the pre-1914 Board of Trade, where he supervised the introduction of a national system of labour exchanges and helped to create the first
national unemployment insurance scheme, Beveridge was transferred first to the Ministry of Munitions (to manage manpower policies) and later to the Ministry of Food (where he oversaw food rationing) during the 1914-1918 conflict. Thanks to disputes with an increasingly powerful trade union movement, he left the civil service after the war to take up the directorship of the London School of Economics and Political Science. In 1934, he returned to government service as chairman of a new Unemployment Insurance Statutory Committee, created to administer benefits to unemployed men with a record of contributions and a justified claim. In this position, he came to recognise the problem of “wage overlap”: wages in some sectors were so low that unemployed men with large families could gain more money by claiming state benefit than they could by accepting a job. The unemployment insurance scheme provided allowances for dependent children; wages did not. This convinced Beveridge of the need for state-funded children’s allowances for employed and unemployed alike (family allowances as they were later known), to restore the incentive for the unemployed to find work.13

Around this time, Beveridge became more sympathetic to the economic theories of J.M. Keynes, with whom he discussed the principles that later underpinned his report prior to the latter’s publication. In his writings of the 1940s, this new conviction transformed the ideas initially documented in his early pamphlet *Insurance for All and Everything* into a feasible post-war policy. The idea of using state powers to create full employment was laid out in *Full Employment in a Free Society*, which followed the Beveridge Report. This specified the policy instruments through which governments might regulate the demand for labour – involving a higher degree of official involvement (through direct state ownership) than Keynes would have sanctioned and supporting a legal minimum wage, compulsory training schemes, price controls, the limitation of free collective bargaining and the extension of public ownership over land. The state should guarantee essential services and – if required – take over private enterprise. This book is in every respect more radical than the Beveridge Report itself, albeit that it never achieved a similar reputation. The publication, however, should not lead us to believe that Beveridge was a late convert to socialism. On the contrary, as his book *Voluntary Action* demonstrates, he was convinced that the role of the state was to supply the means for all to secure a basic minimum. Private (preferably mutual) savings societies should be encouraged and individuals should save – particularly for their old age. There is nothing here about using government as an instrument to promote social equality. When running for Parliament in 1944, Beveridge stood as a Liberal and when elevated to the House of Lords he sat on the Liberal Party benches.

At the start of the Second World War and following the creation of the wartime coalition government under Winston Churchill, Beveridge applied for employment in the Labour ministry, to work on manpower problems, as he had during the previous conflict. The Minister of Labour and National Service, Ernest Bevin, however, had other ideas. Bevin, an old trade unionist who had opposed state direction of

---


manpower in 1914-1918, wanted wartime controls to operate with the full cooperation of the union movement. Beveridge’s background and convictions did not suit this strategy, so the request was refused and he was diverted to chair an interdepartmental committee to enquire how existing schemes of social insurance might be administratively simplified and rationalised. It was from this distinctly uninteresting brief that Beveridge was to fashion his famous report.

The administrative problems of social insurance in pre-1939 Britain were real. Multiple different schemes of state-sponsored insurance protection had been introduced over the previous half-century, each separately administered by different state departments, operating according to their own specific regulations and offering varying cover to different populations. Thanks to his background as a civil servant, Beveridge was one of the few people who understood how the existing systems worked and, as reflected to his 1924 pamphlet, one of the very few with strong ideas about how the situation could be improved. His papers show that he had more or less drawn up his final report before hearing any evidence or listening to the opinions of his fellow committee members. His 1942 report was initially seized by public officials as the means to raise depressed public morale. An abbreviated version was drawn up by the Ministry of Information and circulated to the troops; the full publication became the best-selling British government document of the twentieth century. Beveridge himself, with the encouragement of the Ministry of Reconstruction, undertook numerous overseas and domestic radio broadcasts to promote his ideas as well as going abroad on a series of lecture tours. The American edition of the Beveridge Report sold 50,000 copies in the first six months alone.

In the report Beveridge established three ‘assumptions’ concerning post-war policy development: the introduction of family allowances, a National Health Service free to all in need of medical care and state maintenance of full employment. Although frequently misinterpreted as central recommendations, these assumptions reflected policies already under debate as part of post-war reconstruction and were not of Beveridge’s creation. Family allowances were under discussion in the Treasury as the means to curb wage demands and as an instrument to control wartime inflation. By 1938, the Ministry of Health was already advocating the concentration of all health services in the hands of the state, the war itself necessitated the introduction of a state-run Emergency Medical Service to cope with civilian casualties and in 1941, the year before the Beveridge Report, the British Medical Association had produced a report proposing a state-run medical service for peacetime. Such proposals informed a government White Paper in 1944 that outlined a peacetime health service – but run by local government (national control was only introduced after the war, at the insistence of the then Minister of Health, Nye Bevan). Aside from supporting the principle and making suggestions about financial arrangements, the Beveridge Report says nothing about the NHS future shape or form. As noted above, full

---

17 Beveridge Papers, to be found in the British Library of Political and Economic Science (Archives and Special Collections) at the London School of Economics.
employment became his subject in a later book, but the wartime Coalition Government, fearful that it would again be caught short by the popularity of another Beveridge Report, put out a White Paper on the topic that bore little resemblance to Beveridge’s own proposals. In the Beveridge Report itself, the means to achieve full employment are deemed to fall outside the scope of the committee’s work.21

The main focus of the Beveridge Report is on social insurance. The multiple schemes of health, unemployment and pension insurance, already covering 15-21 million of the British population, were to be unified and – to forestall the deficits that had plagued the interwar unemployment insurance scheme – cover was to become universal.22 All would get the same subsistence-level benefit in return for the same flat-rate contribution; employers and state were to subscribe as well to a single social insurance fund, from which all benefits would be paid. As wives and families would be covered by the working husband’s contribution, the new scheme thus promised subsistence level benefits for all interruptions of earnings “from the cradle to the grave”. This implied, Beveridge claimed, the abolition of household means tests: a promise that substantially increased the popularity of his report. Means tests had been imposed on the long-term unemployed who had exhausted their rights to state benefit in the 1930s.23 The promise to secure their final disappearance and to replace them with benefits available "as of right" was strongly welcomed by the labour movement. However, it is important to understand that "benefit as of right" did not translate to tax-funded support for all claimants.24 On the contrary, as Beveridge made clear, benefits were only available for those households whose breadwinner had made contributions:

‘An attack on poverty means doing not less than is proposed in my Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services to guarantee everyone, on condition of working and contributing while he can work, an income sufficient for his subsistence and that of his family when, for any reason, of sickness, accident, old age or unemployment he cannot work.’ (Emphasis added)25

The relationship between contributions and benefit rights remained sacrosanct, albeit that British social insurance (unlike the German) did not scale either in accordance with earnings.

---

21 Ibid., p. 163-165.
22 The rationale for universal coverage is economic, allowing middle class contributors (with a lower risk of job loss) to subsidise working class claims. This subsidy is arguably reversed in old age as the upper classes receive state pensions for more years than their working class counterparts, thanks to their higher life expectancy. The Social Insurance Fund is designed to be financially self-sufficient.
23 This covered workers who had made fewer than 15 weekly contributions to the unemployment insurance scheme in the previous two years. In the depressed industries – shipbuilding, engineering and coal mining in particular – respectable skilled workers had found that, as unemployment rose, they were treated the same way as any vagrant or beggar. Means tests involved whole households: hence an out-of-work man could be refused help if his children, or even a lodger, were earning anything. The bitterness that this caused provoked the Hunger Marches and is described in the literature of the period.
Beveridge and After: the Implementation of the Report’s Proposals

The wholehearted endorsement of the Beveridge Report by the Labour Party – and the initial reluctance of Winston Churchill to commit the government to what appeared a very costly programme in the middle of a very expensive war – helped to secure an overwhelming Labour victory in the election of 1945. Following this triumph, legislation to implement Beveridge Report was put in place. Two of the three ‘assumptions’ had already been addressed: legislation to introduce tax-funded family allowances had been passed before the election and an official White Paper on Full Employment had been published shortly before Beveridge’s book on the subject. The Labour government took immediate steps to establish a National Health Service and new legislation to introduce the Beveridge’s social insurance scheme was passed in 1946, supplemented in 1948 by the introduction of National Assistance – a measure that effectively centralised future means-tested social assistance, previously administered at local level. Contemporaries (not least Beveridge himself) understood the need for means-tests to be transitory; these were destined, like the Marxist state, to wither away. However, central consolidation of means-tested assistance was to prove prescient for the future development of British social security.

From the outset, the report’s recommendations encountered practical difficulties. Universal subsistence-level benefits proved particularly problematic for two main reasons: their overall expense and the difficulty in establishing a level of subsistence in a country where the cost of living (notably housing costs) varied considerably. From the start, the Beveridge Plan was viewed as potentially expensive in terms of its impact on industrial costs and thus on post-war exports and economic recovery. Its author was forced into early detailed recalculations to demonstrate how future financial burdens might be kept within limits. Three main problem areas had been identified in the report itself. First, rents varied considerably by family size, social class and by geographic location,26 thereby challenging the principle of a flat rate subsistence-level benefit for all claimants. Second, the introduction of the first state pension at subsistence level and conditional on retirement27 posed a particularly heavy burden that threatened the balances of the new insurance fund. Numbers of elderly were rising and, with old age poverty already a pressing concern,28 the wartime government had already come under pressure to raise pensions. Finally, while the non-contributing housewife added to the scheme’s overall expense, the plight of deserted or divorced wives required attention. The report offered its own solutions: housewives should be admitted to all benefits bar unemployment benefit by virtue of their husbands’ contributions – including the divorced and deserted. The problem of variable rent could not be allowed to upset the principle of a flat-rate benefit for all, but those living with high accommodation costs might be permitted to

---

26 Social Insurance..., op. cit., p. 76-90.
27 Tax-funded state pensions were introduced in 1908 and supplemented by contributory pensions in 1925. Both were very low: in the 1930s pensioners with no other resources resorted to means-tested social assistance. From 1940, national assistance replaced local subsidies as inflation rendered state pensions more inadequate.
28 The Rowntree Survey of York in 1936 had found old age to be the main cause of primary poverty.
appeal for supplementation. Finally the pensions issue (the most sensitive and
difficult) might be tackled by phasing in the subsistence level pension over a 20-year
period, to allow insurance contributions to accumulate and post-war economic
growth to lessen the burden. In the interim, lower pensions would encourage older
workers to postpone retirement and/or encourage personal savings. Beveridge
argued with some cogency that, whereas sickness or unemployment might strike
without warning, old age was less a risk than a stage in the lifecycle for which the
working person should be expected to plan.
The author’s analysis cut little ice with the official committee set up to inspect the
Beveridge Report on behalf of the wartime Cabinet (Phillips Committee). This
committee, in view of the substantial extension in state-run insurance envisaged by
Beveridge, criticised his report on a number of moral and economic grounds. It would
pamper the feckless because it abandoned the principle of deterrence on which social
relief in Britain had long been based. Phillips also attacked the principle of
subsistence as unaffordable and impractical in light of the variation in the cost of
living around the country.29 Such criticisms were later embellished by the Treasury,
which argued that most of the proposed changes were unnecessary, threatened the
future balance of payments (as insurance contributions would create higher prices for
exported goods), undermined work incentives and penalised entrepreneurship by
perpetuating high taxation.30 Moreover, contributions were unlikely to sustain
benefit expenditure over the long run. Benefits for divorced wives in particular were
interpreted as “subsidising sin.”31 As the National Council for Women was
demanding a regular allowance for all housewives (a proposal the report rejected),
Beveridge found himself isolated between organisations demanding more benefits for
women and the Treasury demanding fewer. In consequence, the bulk of proposals to
help women were eradicated.32 Treasury objections underpinned the cuts in level and
duration of benefit that appeared in subsequent white papers on social security that
laid down the wartime government’s proposals for reform.33 While the idea of
unifying and rationalising social security administration was accepted, Whitehall
officials and the Conservative Party looked askance at the implications of the
Beveridge Report for future tax burdens and the damage inflicted on work incentives.
Thus considerable inroads had been made by into Beveridge’s proposals well before
the general election of 1945. However, the results of that election – which gave
Labour its first ever absolute majority in the House of Commons – reflected the
evident popularity of the Beveridge Report and the new government set about its
implementation without delay. However, there were real problems. First, it proved
impossible to balance the books: subsistence level benefits could not be funded by
flat-rate contributions at a level that low-paid workers could sustain. The alternative,
to raise the industrial contribution, threatened the post-war export drive. Second, the
variation in the cost of living (largely due to rents) made a uniform subsistence level
benefit incapable of a clear definition. Third, the cost of living index on which official
calculations were based failed to account for either wartime or post-war inflation with

31 TNA: PIN 8/137. Also T 161/1193/S48497/017 and T 171/367: discussions on support for women.
any accuracy. Finally, although Beveridge had recommended that subsistence-level pensions should be phased in over a twenty-year period, the new Labour government found it quite impossible to leave established provision for pensioners untouched. Bowing to popular demand, the government decided to introduce the new pensions immediately (in 1946), while encouraging pensioners to stay in work by not offsetting additional earnings (post-war labour shortages were chronic). Nevertheless, although old age pensions were introduced at more generous rates than family allowances (arguably on the grounds that old people voted but children did not, as The Times remarked), the elderly proved particularly vulnerable to inflation. Social insurance benefit rates remained unindexed and were only reviewed every five years; price rises in the later 1940s corroded state pension values. This meant that one of Beveridge’s most popular promises – the abolition of means testing – was never realised as many poorer pensioners were forced to claim social assistance.

The National Assistance Board (NAB), created in 1948 to replace pre-war local authority means-tested assistance, was originally intended by Beveridge to cater only for a tiny remnant of cases. Although levels of poverty fell in the aftermath of the war, the work of the NAB remained substantial. By 1948, 500,000 pensioners were still applying for means-tested help and by the early 1950s, this figure topped one million. In the early 1960s, investigations by the London School of Economics revealed the high levels of poverty that persisted among the elderly, many too proud to apply to the NAB and to submit to the indignity of the means test. In the absence of index-linked insurance benefits and with an ageing population, this figure continued to grow: today, state social security in Britain is overwhelmingly reliant on means tests. Viewed in the long run, we are forced to conclude that the nineteenth century poor law has made a deeper impact on British social policy than the Beveridge Report ever did.

In the more immediate term, however, the popularity of Labour’s welfare measures guaranteed their survival. During and after the 1951 elections, the reformist wing of the incoming Conservative government overcame earlier resistance to allow the NHS and the principle of universal benefits to survive intact. However, by the later 1950s, arguments against universality were being revived. The objections heard in wartime Whitehall, detailed above, concerning the damage universal benefits imposed by undermining work incentives, sustaining ‘unrealistic’ wages and raising industrial costs – all began to command a wider audience. Burdening the public sector by paying benefits to those who did not strictly need state support was a waste of resources. Hence the situation began to change: memories of the 1930s had faded, full employment and the spread of private welfare systems (notably for pensions) guaranteed that the level of state benefits was becoming irrelevant to anyone but the very poor. Slowly, traditional assumptions about the role of the state in supporting the indigent re-emerged, thus setting the stage for their full-bodied resuscitation with the election of Mrs Thatcher in 1979. The traditional tenets of British political economy about the minimal role of the state in supporting the indigent had, in spite of Beveridge’s best efforts, never really gone away.

---

34 John Macnicol, "Beveridge and Old Age", in Hills et al., Beveridge and Social Security, op. cit., p. 73-97.
Conclusion

This review has identified the real contents of the Beveridge Report and has analysed their impact on post-war welfare legislation – but only in Britain. Thanks to the promotion of the Report’s principles and arguments – not least by the author himself - its fame spread widely and its recommendations were discussed in many European and other countries in the immediate aftermath of the war, but with limited impact in nearly all cases. Such limitations, however, have not stopped the Beveridge Report being widely interpreted as a blueprint for the ideal welfare state towards which all should aspire. However, as this account has documented, its achievements were more limited. The report contains several anomalies and practical difficulties that belie its reputation. Closer inspection of the actual recommendations reveals that widespread assumptions that Beveridge favoured tax-funded, universal benefits are simply inaccurate as those who did not contribute to his scheme could not lodge a claim under it. Further, as other authors have noted, there are doubts as to whether Beveridge’s recommendations were ever feasible. We might question, for example, whether uniform flat-rate benefits can be reconciled with the idea of subsistence when the cost of living is variable, whether all administration should be centralised in the hands of a faceless central bureaucracy or whether the low paid should contribute the same amount as the rich. Such objections, however, ignore the social thought underpinning Beveridge’s recommendations and misinterpret his vision of the more socially just society he sought to promote.

The Beveridge Report should be understood as a product of its time: the result of wartime conviction, reinforced by victory, of the merits of state planning and the extension of central regulation and controls as the means by which effective and efficient social reform might be achieved. In his subsequent writing, Beveridge demonstrated his belief, in agreement with J.M. Keynes, that central government indeed possessed the means to guarantee economic growth and full employment without which his system of universal social insurance was doomed to fail. This faith in a central state bureaucracy as an instrument of social justice stands in stark contrast to many continental European welfare systems, where union representation to protect the interests of the insured was deemed essential in social security administration. However, while Beveridge may have agreed with the Labour Party on the need for state action, he cannot be described as a socialist, or anything like one. His object was to create a social security system that contained social dependency at minimal public cost. In his later publications he continued to promote the merits of voluntary action, of the virtues of individual enterprise in the context of a liberal market economy. Nationalisation was only advocated as a last resort, to stem the results of market failure. For Beveridge, it was never, as the Labour Party claimed, the means to secure the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange as required by a socialist polity.

---

36 Hills et al., Beveridge and Social Security, op. cit., chapters 9-10; 12-14.
37 E.g. Lowe, in Hills et al., Beveridge and Social Security, op. cit.
38 Notably Full Employment..., op. cit.
39 Harris, in Hills et alii, Beveridge and Social Security, op. cit.
Instead of understanding Beveridge as a member of the British political left, we should understand him as a product of nineteenth century British liberalism whose central tenets predate the First World War. Within this context, the state is an instrument designed to foster citizenship, to encourage participation in voluntary collective activity that, thanks to its independence from official interventions and rules, can promote prosperity and the common good in accordance with local situations and prevailing circumstances.⁴⁰ Here, personal responsibility and self-sufficiency form the foundations of collective liberty. These assumptions had long underpinned the British poor laws, but Beveridge sought to attain the same ends by throwing a safety net of minimal state benefits to remove the threat of destitution that undermined personal ambition and discouraged enterprise. Unlike his socialist contemporaries, Beveridge was less interested in equality than in the workings of the labour market as an instrument to eradicate poverty and generate economic prosperity. He established an indissoluble link between citizen and worker. He disliked means-tests as much as any labouring man, but for different reasons, claiming that targeted support undermined incentives towards independence and "demoralised" the recipient (or, in more modern parlance, encouraged social dependency). Social insurance, in contrast, rewarded regular work and – as benefit rights were not indefinite – offered incentives for claimants to seek it. Beveridge’s benefits acted to support ‘interruptions’ in earnings, not to replace them. His belief in human economic rationality is evident: men would act properly if given the right economic incentives. The proper action of the citizen is to work regularly and the duty of the state, through the promotion of contributory insurance, is to ensure that such behaviour is rewarded. This construction of citizenship is rather different than the one commonly ascribed to him, which understands Beveridge Report as offering support as of right to all in need.

This perspective also explains Beveridge’s disinterest in social democracy. Unlike Bismarckean social insurance, restored in Germany after the Second World War, Beveridge's vision never involved the representation of the insured within social security administration. On the contrary, his advocacy of a rational, centralised bureaucracy reflects his faith in an impartial state. The civil servant, having no vested interest, is in a position to act rationally in the interest of all. Throughout his life, Beveridge’s ideas had clashed intermittently with the principles of industrial democracy and the rights of free collective bargaining that sustained the British trade union movement. Although the Trade Union Congress endorsed the greater part of the Beveridge Report with enthusiasm, the attitude of leading trade unionists towards him, poisoned by the experience of the First World War, remained evident in Bevin’s reception of his application for government service in 1940. For Beveridge, contributions pooled on behalf of the industrial workforce were not the workers’ property, but represented the means by which central government could encourage both sides of industry to negotiate employment reforms to guarantee higher productivity and to eradicate irregular working habits. When examining Beveridgean and Bismarckean systems of social insurance from this perspective, the latter appears both more decentralised and democratic than the former. The organisational

⁴⁰ For a fuller exploration of the legacies of nineteenth century liberal ideas see Jose Harris, "Political Thought and the Welfare State, 1870-1940", Past and Present, 135, 1992, p. 116-141.
imperative implicit in Beveridge’s vision of social insurance was, from its inception, more bureaucratic and centralised than systems found in much of Western Europe. This contrast points to a final conundrum in the popular view of Beveridge and the systems of social support he promoted. It indicates that the ideas on which Beveridge based his writings did not involve any incorporation of social democratic principles, which were essentially foreign to Britain’s liberal political economy. In Beveridge’s vision of economic planning, the central powers taken by government during the war emergency are to be retained and applied as required in the years of peace. We know today that this perspective, reflecting the era in which Beveridge was writing, was never accepted in the long term. Controls that were tolerated for the sake of winning the war were dismantled in its aftermath and, with them, the means to realise Beveridge’s ideas about economic planning to sustain the full employment that made his social insurance scheme viable. Divorced from its foundations, the Beveridge’s social welfare regime proved unsustainable and Britain drifted back towards more traditional systems of welfare administration in the decades following the war.

The author
Noel Whiteside is Professor of Comparative Public Policy at the University of Warwick (UK). She is a contemporary historian of social and public policy development with specific interests in labour markets, social policy and constructions of social dependency in comparative (European) perspective. Recent work focuses on historical constructions of unemployment and contemporary pension policies.

Abstract
This paper revisits the famous Beveridge Report of 1942 with the object of re-evaluating its contents. It argues that, on several counts, the reputation of the text as a blueprint for a socially just and equitable welfare state is misplaced and that its influence on British post-war welfare reform has been exaggerated. The paper locates the Beveridge Report within its historical context to argue that, whatever its merits at the time of its publication, it is now a dated document which is widely misinterpreted by contemporary social policy writers, who perpetuate mythical interpretations in a manner that is not historically justifiable.

Résumé
Cet article propose de réinterpréter le célèbre rapport Beveridge de 1942 et d’en réévaluer le contenu. Sur bien des aspects, la réputation du texte comme une étape clé de la construction d’un État-providence juste et équitable est usurpée et son influence sur les réformes de la protection sociale britannique d’après-guerre a été exagérée. L’article remet le rapport Beveridge dans son contexte historique et montre que, quels que soient ses mérites au moment de sa publication, c’est aujourd’hui un document daté, et mal lu et interprété par les chercheurs en sciences sociales, qui se font les relais d’interprétations mythiques, injustifiables historiquement.

Pour citer cet article : Noël Whiteside, « The Beveridge Report and Its Implementation: a Revolutionary Project ? », Histoire@Politique. Politique,