Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

Sir Ralph Howell, R.I.P. [1]

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The Adam Smith Institute is saddened by the news [3] of the death of the former MP for North Norfolk, Sir Ralph Howell.

A resolute free-marketeer, Ralph was the author of the ASI reports *Why Work?* and *Why Unemployment?* In the first, he pointed out how the unemployment and welfare benefit system ? alongside high taxation ? created a poverty trap. When people received generous benefits when they did not work, and were taxed when they did, is it any wonder, he asked, that we had high unemployment rates? All the more so when moving to work meant losing benefits ? leaving some families facing an effective rate of tax of 70% when they tried to move off benefits and into employment.

Ralph's second ASI report suggested a solution. Ralph was one of the first people in the UK to mention the W word ? workfare. He made the point that people who are fit for work should either be working, looking for work, or training for work ? and not just living off the taxpayer while doing nothing. After all, even Lord Beveridge, the intellectual architect of the welfare state, imagined unemployment benefit as no more than a temporary form of assistance. Various US states, observed Howell, had a policy of making people do at least something in return for their benefits, something that would hopefully get them back into the active workforce. After all, a job is the best welfare benefit there is. The existing policy trapped people in poverty and unemployment and, over the years, made them less and less likely to get back into work.

That was, of course, almost twenty years ago. And now, it seems, the government is racing ahead to try to prove itself more radical than the Tories and introduce exactly what Ralph Howell proposed ? ending the poverty trap and prompting people on unemployment benefit to take active measures to get themselves back into work. It's taken a long time, but then Gordon Brown is a very *cautious* man. But good ideas do come through in the end.

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