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Don't hate the players, hate the game [1]

Written by **Sam Bowman** [2] | Monday 24 June 2013

I usually agree with Mark Littlewood, Director-General of the IEA, so I was surprised by his piece in the Mail on Sunday this weekend [3]. Mark proposes a public register of everyone claiming benefits of any kind ? pensions, disability living allowance, jobseeker?s allowance, and so on. This strikes me as a very bad idea indeed.

Mark?s aim is to increase public awareness of benefits claimants who are receiving much more in benefits than most people would think reasonable. This, he hopes, will increase the public?s appetite for welfare cuts. Actually, I think people overestimate how much money individual people on benefits get, but the proposals are undesirable for other reasons.

Mark says that ?This wouldn?t be a matter of ?naming and shaming? anyone. After all, if you are legally entitled to a particular benefit, what is there to be ashamed about? Anyone ashamed to claim money from the State maybe shouldn?t be claiming it.?

In my experience, most unemployed people are profoundly ashamed of being unemployed. Removing their privacy, exposing them to gossiping neighbours and their children to bullying classmates, will just make that even worse.

And Jobseeker?s Allowance only accounts for a small proportion of the welfare budget [4]. These proposals would also include people on disability benefits for socially stigmatized mental illnesses and physical disabilities that they would like to keep private.

Mark says that Britons ?are far too reasonable to start taking up pitchforks and burning torches and assaulting imagined benefit cheats.? I am less sure. This is, of course, the same country that saw a paediatrician being hounded [5] by vandals who confused the word ?paediatrician? with ?paedophile?.

These proposals would humiliate people on benefits and rob them of their privacy. They don?t deserve it. Many (probably most) of them are dependent on welfare because of the state itself, and it is senseless to make their lives even more difficult instead of tackling the real causes of their poverty.

If you think that unemployment is largely caused by government mismanagement of the economy [6], it makes no sense to humiliate people for being out of work. If you think that government welfare has crowded out private charity [7], you shouldn?t blame people forced to rely on government disability benefits. If you blame planning regulations for the high cost of housing [8], you should focus on those regulations before you cut off the money that mitigates the problem for a few poor people.

I wish the only problem today was the government?s unwillingness to cut spending. In fact, that spending

usually exists to relieve much bigger problems that can?t be found on the Treasury balance sheet. Often, those problems are state-made.

To me, this is one of the key messages that ?bleeding heart? libertarians need to get across to other free marketeers. Cutting back the state is a bit like a game of Jenga ? if you blithely pull away the supports that people rely on before you take away the causes of that reliance, you?ll only end up making things worse.

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