

## [It's complicated](#) [1]

Written by [Jan Boucek](#) [2] | Wednesday 22 February 2012

Last week, BBC Radio 4's PM show each day profiled an unemployed person. On Friday, it featured Leanna Brown, 20 years old, a single mum of a two-year old, living in Sheffield and unemployed for two years.

Ms Brown said she lives in council housing for which she pays £7 a week rent, gets £100 every two weeks for income support, child tax credit of £60 a week plus unspecified child benefits. She earned nine GCSEs, tried for A-levels but didn't like it, took a course as a nail technician and now has ambitions of being a youth worker. She said her gas and electric bills come to £60 a week.

Ms Brown says she's diligent about seeking work with regular visits to a local employment agency and the local Job Centre. She's frustrated and increasingly depressed from her situation, so much so that she's lost four stone in weight over the last few months.

Commenting on her case, Jonathan Portes of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research described her situation as 'quite typical' and 'not her fault'. He said it was a 'failure of macro-economic policy rather than anything specific to the individual.'

Well, not so fast. It's a sad tale indeed and there's little doubt her immediate prospects are bleak but to blame it all on macro-economic policy misses the point that the macro-economy is nothing more than the sum total of micro-policies and individual decisions.

This admittedly comfortable, free market loving, big government fearing, libertarian worries about the Ms Browns of this world but has a lot of questions before pulling any macro-economic levers. After all, Gordon Brown did that for years - throwing huge sums of cash at any and every problem.

So let's start with the big elephant in the room, an issue not addressed in the PM profile. Why is Ms Brown a single mum? She said she 'didn't plan the pregnancy' but she clearly also didn't plan well to not get pregnant. In this day and age, how are we still churning out pregnant teenage girls and then fretting about their resulting situation? Whatever amount of money our schools spend on sex education is clearly a waste as Britain's woeful teenage pregnancy rankings in the world attest.

Where's the father of Ms Brown's child in all this? And what about any other family of Ms Brown? Neither comes up in the PM profile as if they're irrelevant to Ms Brown's situation. Study after study shows that nothing enhances prospects in life as well as a strong family yet our welfare micro-policies are failing to encourage them.

Ms Brown's initial aspirations as a nail technician and now as a youth worker also raise eyebrows. Is that the result of wise advice from our legions of counsellors? Nobody suggested more broadly useful skills like proficiency with Office software or elementary bookkeeping or food catering?

And what about that £60 a week for gas and electricity? That's about 2/3s more than what we spend on a four bedroom detached house so either Ms Brown's flat is really drafty or she keeps all appliances and

lights on at all times or the number needs challenging. And if she does indeed spend that amount which micro-economic policies are keeping these utility prices so high? Wind and solar subsidies? Foot-dragging on shale gas development?

To PM's credit, they also had the upbeat Paul Brown from the Prince's Trust to comment. He noted that 1-in-5 unemployed youth means 4-in-5 are finding work and pointed to his charity's success in steering many of this nation's Ms Browns into a good place. The record of focused charities is far better than the welfare state's so the more outsourcing to them, the better.

Ms Brown's case is a tough one. She's been let down by any number of government agents and by her own mistakes. Blaming it all on a failure of macro-economic policies misses the point ? it's more complicated than that.

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