

All in it together? Disabled people, the Coalition and welfare to work

Ruth Patrick

This paper critically explores the Westminster coalition government's efforts to assist disabled people off benefits and into paid employment, focusing on the ongoing migration of Incapacity Benefit claimants onto Employment and Support Allowance. Drawing on the social model of disability, it is argued that the current reform agenda individualises the problem of disability, placing too much emphasis on disabled people's employability while neglecting broader societal barriers to their full and equal labour market participation. Given these shortcomings, it seems unlikely that the Coalition's approach will help disabled people to make the transition from welfare-to-work.

Introduction

During its first two years in office, the Coalition has sought to marry a tough message on the necessity of addressing the public sector deficit with reassurances that the most vulnerable and those in 'genuine' need will be protected. While talk of a 'fair' approach to cutting the deficit is rhetorically appealing and politically pragmatic, there are unanswered questions regarding how far the promises to protect the vulnerable, and lift people out of poverty, are matched by the policy detail. Given their greater incidence of poverty and frequent reliance on social welfare (Parckar, 2008), disabled people are one group likely to be particularly affected by the government's efforts to 'reform' welfare. Most notably, the measures necessary to deliver on the government's commitment to reduce expenditure on benefits by a total of £18bn by 2014–15, as well as anticipated cuts in social care budgets as a result of large reductions in local authority funding, are likely to disproportionately affect disabled people (Gentleman, 2011b).

What is more, the Coalition, like New Labour before it, is committed to assisting benefit claimants to make the transition from economic inactivity to paid work, with disabled people identified as a target group in this regard (Houston and Lindsay, 2010). As part of its welfare-to-work policy programme, David Cameron's coalition is taking forward an ambitious reform agenda which encompasses benefit migration and reassessment, new employment programmes and measures to expand the reach of welfare conditionality for disabled people. There are fears that the government's approach may adversely affect some of the most vulnerable in society by tightening up benefit eligibility, while simultaneously residualising the social welfare provided to those disabled people who are simply not able to participate in paid employment.

Key words Employment and Support Allowance • welfare reform • disability

As the disability activist and cartoonist Crippen noted, while Osborne promises that ‘we are all in this together’, perhaps some, notably disabled people, are deeper in it than others (Crippen 2011).

This paper explores the Coalition’s welfare reforms as they affect working-age disabled people, with a particular focus on those measures designed to support (some might say compel) into employment those disabled people with the ‘capability’ for paid work. The new Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) regime is critically discussed, while the replacement of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), a benefit to help to meet additional costs due to disability, is seen as beyond the scope of this article. The government’s reform programme is shown to be ill-equipped for actually increasing the employment of disabled people, with the Coalition justifying policies by creating simplistic and unsustainable dichotomies between ‘welfare dependency’ and paid work, and irresponsibility and responsibility. This article is informed by a social model approach to disability and many of the criticisms of the government’s reform programme flow from this theoretical starting point. A social model perspective defines disability as the barriers which operate to prevent disabled people from participating as equals in society (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). The social model emerged from within the disabled people’s movement in the 1970s as a challenge to the dominant medical model of disability which equates disability with the individual’s medical ‘problems’, firmly locating the problem and deficit at the individual level (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). Applied to employment, the social model focuses on the societal barriers faced by disabled people seeking work, while the medical model concentrates on an individual’s impairment(s) and work-readiness (Roulstone, 2004). Developing welfare-to-work policies grounded in a social model perspective would be the most effective way to deliver reforms with real potential to increase disabled people’s participation in the labour market. Unfortunately, as this article demonstrates, the Coalition’s policy agenda reflects a dogged, if implicit, reliance on the medical model of disability which individualises the ‘problem’ of disability and neglects the more empowering and meaningful analysis provided by the social model.

A new departure?

Before exploring the policy reforms around the new disability benefit, Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), it is important to consider whether the Coalition’s approach represents a new departure or rather demonstrates essential continuity with its New Labour predecessors in government. The Coalition talks up its welfare reforming project, promising the greatest changes since Beveridge, and guaranteeing to usher in a new regime that finally ensures that everyone who can work is working, or at the very least taking steps to return to work. The end of a ‘something for nothing culture’ is heralded, a soundbite immediately familiar to observers of New Labour’s administrations. Indeed, while the rhetoric and policy gloss are all about a party finally getting ‘tough’ on welfare, the reality is of much more continuity, and rather less change.

This is particularly marked in the disability arena, where the ESA reforms are a New Labour legacy which the Coalition is simply taking forward in a very similar vein to that planned by New Labour. Further, while the Work Programme is lauded as an innovative and 'new' model of delivering back-to-work support, it in fact exhibits marked similarities with New Labour's Flexible New Deal (Deacon and Patrick, 2011). On welfare conditionality and sanctions, there are signals that the Coalition is prepared to take this approach further and faster, extending the reach of conditions as well as the possible sanctions for non-compliance with the welfare-to-work regime (DWP, 2012c).

Writing just before the May 2010 General Election, Lister and Bennett (2010) described a process of 'policy leapfrog', with Labour and the Conservatives competing to be seen as the 'toughest' on welfare reform. The direction of travel is undoubtedly the same, and it is thus possible to sketch out a new welfare settlement which sees all three main parties in broad agreement on the need to 're-vision' the welfare contract, increase personal responsibility and ensure that all those who can work do take steps to return to work or risk benefit sanctions (Deacon and Patrick, 2011).

While the Coalition broadly shares New Labour's approach on welfare to work, it also appears committed to a programme of welfare residualisation, such that the value and levels of benefits are gradually eroded via measures such as indexing benefits to the Consumer Prices Index rather than the Retail Prices Index, changes to Housing Benefit and reductions in the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) caseload via reform (DWP, 2010b; HM Treasury, 2010). This project of retrenchment, which is occurring in tandem with continued efforts to expand the reach of welfare conditionality, may see some meaningful differences emerging between the approaches of the Coalition and New Labour. Certainly, New Labour did oversee some substantive redistribution, albeit by stealth, and their welfare reforms were also tied to real efforts to make work pay, via programmes of tax credits, support with childcare and the National Minimum Wage (Lister, 2001). By contrast, the Coalition seems more drawn to measures to increase work incentives by reducing the rewards attached to out-of-work benefits, and this may develop into an ideological dividing line between the political parties.

The extent of consensus around welfare reform is grounded in shared ideological beliefs regarding the perniciousness of 'dependency' on out-of-work benefits, which is allied to the New Labour mantra, now adopted and shared by the Coalition, that 'work is the best form of welfare'. All three main parties equate social exclusion with non-work, and endow paid employment with transformative properties which extend beyond pecuniary rewards to improved self-confidence, self-esteem, better family life, more communally minded ethics and physical and mental wellbeing (Deacon and Patrick, 2011). How far these empowering rewards are also available to those working in menial, temporary and badly paid jobs is neglected in this political analysis, despite the evidence (including governmental research) of the importance of the type and quality of work in delivering these positive outcomes (Wadell and Burton, 2006). The persistence of in-work poverty is similarly absent in these discourses.

In defending and supporting measures to encourage people off benefits and into work, all three parties draw simplistic and unsustainable distinctions between 'passive' 'welfare dependency' and active, responsible working behaviour. Social welfare has been recast as a social bad, to be reduced wherever possible, while politicians seem increasingly comfortable engaging in the labelling and stereotyping of welfare benefit claimants. At his first Conservative Party Conference as Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne described benefit 'dependency' as a 'lifestyle choice', while the Prime Minister David Cameron has bemoaned claimants 'sitting on their sofas waiting for the benefits to arrive' (Cameron, 2010). Taking this message forward, the then employment minister Chris Grayling reassured us that the new Work Programme will change all this: 'it will create a new world for benefit claimants. No more sitting at home on benefits doing nothing. No more excuses about it all being too difficult' (Grayling, 2010).

Given the broad agreement on the need for welfare reform among mainstream political parties, it is increasingly necessary to look beyond political debates to find voices critical of the current tranche of reforms. When considering the reforms facing disabled people, one does not need to look far to find loud (and angry) constituencies challenging and questioning the government's reform agenda. The past two years have witnessed the emergence of new disability campaigning groups in the UK, such as 'Broken of Britain' (Broken of Britain, 2011), who use the media of the web (blogging, tweeting and virtual protest) to voice their disquiet with the nature and possible consequences of the welfare reform programme. While the possible impact of these new political groupings is as yet unclear, it is certainly the case that their opposition represents a pertinent challenge to the political dogma on welfare reform which gives unquestioning primacy to efforts to 'activate' unemployed and inactive people, and singles out welfare conditionality as *the* policy tool for effecting this change.

From 'incapacity' to 'employment and support'

In turning to a critical analysis of the Coalition's welfare-to-work plans as they affect disabled people, the benefits reform of most relevance is the migration of all existing Incapacity Benefit (IB) claimants on to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Launched in 2008 by New Labour for all new disability claimants, ESA is designed to focus more on what disabled people can do rather than what they cannot. At the start of a claim, individuals undertake a Work Capability Assessment (WCA), before being placed in one of three groups (DWP, 2011a). Those who are found to have the most severe impairments are placed in the 'support group' (SG) of the benefit, where they receive a higher level of ESA with no conditions attached to its receipt. Those judged to have some 'limited' capability to work are placed in the 'work-related activity group' (WRAG), where they receive a lower level of benefit and are expected to participate in work-related activity or risk benefit sanctions. A third group constitutes those who are assessed as 'fit for work', refused ESA and

instead offered Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA), provided that they meet the eligibility conditions.

At the same time as progressing with this migration, the Coalition is planning to extend the work-related conditions for those placed in the WRAG (DWP, 2012c). The government intends that – from December 2012 – disabled people in the WRAG who fail to comply with the conditionality regime will face increased sanctions, threatened with the removal of their full personal allowance for Employment and Support Allowance (£71 a week of a total possible payment of £99.15, 2012 figures). The ESA personal allowance will be removed for fixed periods of seven, fourteen and 28 days for first, second and third 'offences', on top of an open-ended sanction until claimants re-engage with work-related activity (2012b). This represents a considerable ratcheting up of the sanctions which can be imposed, with ESA claimants currently only facing cuts to the 'work-related activity component' of ESA (the extra money awarded to ESA WRAG claimants when contrasted with JSA rates). Furthermore, the government has clarified that work-related activity should be understood to include participation in work experience schemes, and there is thus the prospect of disability benefit claimants being sanctioned for failing (or refusing) to undertake unpaid work in return for their benefit. Figures show that sanctions are being applied to ESA claimants, with 8,440 individuals in the WRAG sanctioned between September 2010 and August 2011 for 'offences' such as failing to attend interviews with personal advisers (Malik, 2012).

Table 1 shows the official figures for all new ESA claims started between June and August 2011 for which a decision on the claim had been reached (DWP, 2012a). Of those applying for ESA in this period, 46% of claimants were awarded the benefit, with 19% of claimants placed in the work-related activity group, and 27% in the support group. A far higher percentage (54% of claimants) were found 'fit for work'. It should be noted that these figures only include those whose claim for ESA was completed. Some 36% of individuals who made an ESA application withdrew their claim or did not complete the assessment and there is no information available about the outflow of this group and, in particular, whether they moved into work, started a claim for a different benefit such as JSA, or simply dropped out of the benefits system altogether (DWP, 2012a).

Table 1: Results of Initial Work Capability Assessment, Figures for new ESA claimants (June to August 2011)

Outcome of WCA	Percentage
Support group	27
Work-related activity group	19
Fit for work	54

Source: DWP, 2012a

Figures are now also available for the ongoing national migration of all IB claimants on to ESA (available statistics relate to the 104,000 claimants referred for migration up to July 2011). As Table 2 shows, when compared to the figures for all new ESA claims, a slightly lower proportion of claimants were found fit for work (37%), while a much larger proportion were placed in both the WRAG and the SG. Evidently, though, the large majority of disability benefit claimants (71%) migrated from IB were either refused ESA altogether or placed in the WRAG. In both instances, continued eligibility for out-of-work benefits becomes dependent on efforts to return to work, via either the conditionality inherent in JSA or the strengthened conditionality framework within the work-related activity component of ESA. The Coalition's target is to migrate all 1.5 million existing IB claimants on to ESA by March 2014, by completing 11,000 reassessments a week from May 2011 (Disability Alliance, 2011). If figures from pilots in Aberdeen and Burnley are replicated at the national level, some 1,050,000 former IB claimants will find themselves brought within the remit of work-related conditionality as their claims migrate from IB to either JSA or the WRAG within ESA (provided they meet the eligibility conditions) (Beatty and Fothergill, 2011).

Table 2: Results of Initial Work Capability Assessment for disability benefits migration from IB to ESA (for those referred to migration up to July 2011)

Outcome of WCA	Percentage
Support group	29
Work-related activity group	34
Fit for work	37

Source: DWP, 2012d

Worryingly, there are real concerns that the work capability assessment (WCA) is a faulty instrument for assessing disabled people's fitness for work, with particular issues around its accuracy, and its ability to assess fluctuating conditions and mental health issues (Hawkes, 2011; Citizens Advice, 2010b, 2012). Indeed, a recent report by the Work and Pensions Select Committee was highly critical of the assessment, arguing that the WCA is failing to correctly assess employability, while also noting that there is a 'widely felt mistrust of the whole process' amongst claimants (DWP, 2011a: 3). In June 2012, the British Medical Association passed a motion calling for the WCA to be withdrawn, and committed to lobbying for its replacement 'with a rigorous and safe system that does not cause avoidable harm to some of the weakest and most vulnerable in society' (cited in Gentleman, 2012). ESA is the benefit with the highest appeal rate (Grant and Wood, 2011), with a commensurately high level of successful appeals (some 40% are found in the appellant's favour) (DWP, 2011b). There are thus understandable fears that the WCA is incorrectly finding people fit for work, while also placing people for whom work is not a realistic prospect in the WRAG of ESA, with concomitant risks that such individuals are wrongly subjected to conditionality and the risk of benefit sanctions.

Moreover, the WCA is based on assessing individuals' capabilities for work, and is thus grounded in a medical model of disability with stress placed on the individual's capabilities/deficiencies and how these may enable/prevent them from working. No account is taken of broader societal barriers to work which may make disabled people's attempts to secure and sustain paid work more problematic. This flaw with the assessment tool has been highlighted by disability charities, with Scope calling for the WCA's replacement with a 'Real World Test' to assess the 'real' barriers that people face, such as issues around transport, availability of suitable jobs and access to appropriate aids and adaptations (Hawkes, 2011). The government itself has acknowledged the issues with the WCA, commissioning an independent review of the assessment tool by Sir Malcolm Harrington. In his first report in December 2010, Harrington described problems with 'every stage' of the process, concluding that the WCA is 'mechanistic, impersonal and lacks empathy' (Harrington, 2010: 31). The government accepted Harrington's suggested reforms of the WCA, and appointed him to conduct further reviews of the process on an annual basis. Although Harrington's second report detailed improvements, it also noted that 'there is still further to go' (p. 7), with no progress made on reforming the appeals procedures (Harrington, 2011). Despite this, the government has resisted pressures to pause the IB-ESA migration until all of Harrington's recommendations are implemented.

Looking beyond the issues with the WCA, there are broader criticisms of the welfare-to-work model on which the whole ESA structure is founded. Critically, ESA attaches conditions to disability benefit receipt, such that those disabled people found to have some capability to work are then expected to take active steps to prepare for work or risk benefit sanctions. This model places the corrective lens firmly on the disabled person herself, who is seen to require the threat of sanctions, admittedly alongside the promise of 'more support', to assist her to make the transition from benefit 'dependency' to work (Houston and Lindsay, 2010). Thus, the deficit is located with the individual themselves, rather than the disabling society in which we all live. The focus is firmly on the supply side of the labour market, with a concomitant neglect of the demand-side barriers which may impede and prevent disabled people from progressing into paid work (Lindsay and Houston, 2011). Concentrating on the supply side diverts policy attention and resources on to issues with disabled people's job-readiness, skills, employability and motivation to enter work. While there is certainly a place for supply-side measures in efforts to support disabled people into work, the reality is that they also face a range of demand-side barriers, including the impact of stigma and discrimination; physical challenges around access and transport; and issues around the availability of suitably flexible job opportunities (Roulstone and Barnes, 2005; Barnes et al, 2010).

This supply-side-centric policy focus and neglect of demand-side factors can be mapped on to the government's reliance on the medical model of disability and implicit undermining of the lessons and policy analysis provided by the social model of disability. In concentrating policy on the steps disabled people need to take to enter work, while also utilising the motivator of conditionality and possible sanctions, the government falls into an medical model analysis of disability which places primacy on

the supposed ‘problem’ (impaired work-readiness) of the individual disabled person. A social model approach challenges this analysis, instead compelling policy makers to direct their reforming zeal towards efforts to break down the societal barriers which constitute our disabling society, and which so often frustrate and undermine disabled people’s efforts to enter paid work.

However, although the government’s policy direction is firmly grounded in an medical model of disability, it is quite comfortable co-opting social model arguments in seeking to justify its welfare reforms in other areas (Morris, 2011), while also continuing to employ social model rhetoric in its stated commitments of combating discrimination and ensuring equality of opportunity for all regardless of impairment. The Coalition presents reforms to DLA, which will see individuals’ aids and adaptations taken into account in considering what additional care and mobility support they require, as evidence of a social model approach. This corruption and (mis)use of the social model could lead to reduced eligibility for the new Personal Independence Payments (PIPs) if, for example, a wheelchair user is found ineligible for support on the basis that they are mobile thanks to their use of a wheelchair (Morris, 2011). While this borrowing of social model rhetoric and arguments certainly muddies the waters, it should not detract from the extent to which – in the welfare-to-work domain – the government’s depiction of policy problem and proposed solution relies entirely on medical model thinking.

As well as neglecting the lessons of the social model of disability, a medical model agenda centred on the individual’s employability and implied ‘passive’ ‘welfare dependency’ also serves to further entrench the broader stigmatising of disabled benefit claimants as inactive and non-contributing citizens. These substantive issues with the ESA benefits regime are only amplified as we move on to consider another Coalition policy reform: time-limiting contributory ESA.

Time-limiting disability benefits: contributory benefits no more?

In the October 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, the Coalition announced plans to time-limit contributory ESA for those in the ‘work-related activity group’ to one year from April 2012 (HM Treasury, 2010). Justified as part of the package of welfare reforms and public sector cuts, this reform signifies a marked reduction in the contributory assistance available to people who become ill or disabled after a period of employment. The reforms mean that as many as 400,000 claimants could lose their entitlement to ESA completely by 2015–16 (Gentleman, 2011b). Contributions-based ESA claimants found to have some capability to work, and thus placed in the WRAG, now have a relatively arbitrary deadline of one year to find a job and leave benefits or risk the termination of their social welfare support. While those who qualify for income-based ESA will see their support continue after this date, those who do not qualify, perhaps due to savings above the £16,000 threshold or the presence of a working partner, will have their state support terminated. Given the societal barriers to disabled people’s participation in work, it

seems morally questionable as well as socially unjust to withdraw benefits after what is a comparatively short period of just one year. This reform may push many families below the poverty line, while also potentially putting pressure on relationships where a working partner suddenly finds themselves the sole breadwinner and financial mainstay for the whole household.

Arguably, this time limiting is best characterised as one dimension of the Coalition's broader programme of welfare state retrenchment which operates to devalue and residualise the role and reach of social welfare. At the same time, it represents a substantial erosion of the already flimsy contributory principle, given that those who have contributed years of national insurance will find that their 'insurance policy' only pays out for a short period of time. Time-limiting also heightens the consequences of the WCA misclassifying claimants as having some limited capability for work, given that the support component of ESA is subject to no such time limiting. Overall, the removal of ESA after one year can be seen as the ultimate sanction for those disabled people who fail to comply with the welfare-to-work regime and are not off benefits and in work within the government-set 12 months' timescale.

A new welfare contract: but where's the much-promised support?

In defending a regime of sanctions and conditions to encourage people back into work, the Coalition, like New Labour before them, repeatedly deploys contractualist arguments, promising that with higher expectations and compulsion also come more support and assistance to enter the labour market (DWP, 2008, 2010b). While there is evident political mileage in drawing on ideas of the justice of reciprocity by welding a deepening of personal responsibility to a promise of increased support, what is less apparent is whether such support is actually forthcoming (Grover and Piggott, 2012). This issue is particularly pertinent when exploring the assistance provided to disabled people in making the transition from benefits into work, a transition which becomes even more challenging when placed in the context of recession and continuing high levels of unemployment.

At the forefront of the Coalition's support 'offer' to the 'missing million' (the million disabled people currently out of work who want to be in employment (Stanley and Regan, 2003)) is the rollout of the Work Programme, a single programme of back-to-work support provided by the third and private sector. Contractors work to outcome-based contracting models, with payment largely based on results in moving welfare claimants into the labour market (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2011b). The Work Programme subsumes most existing programmes of welfare-to-work support, incorporating assistance to disabled people, long-term unemployed people and young job seekers, as well as ex-offenders, drug users and lone parents (DWP, 2010c). Providers take a 'black box' approach to service delivery, meaning that there is no centrally determined model of provision, with the government setting out only the results that will be required before payments are made (DWP, 2010c). Thus, providers have the freedom and discretion to establish

programmes which follow various delivery models, personalised to individual circumstances and including whichever combination of coaching, training, work experience and skills-based learning is thought to be most effective. The government is quick to highlight the flexibility and innovation that the 'black box' approach can deliver (DWP, 2010c), although a recent evaluation of the previous (Labour) government's Flexible New Deal, which piloted 'black box' commissioning, found little evidence of either creativity or flexibility in programme delivery (Vegeer et al, 2011).

The Work Programme is mandatory for all disabled people in the ESA WRAG when, but only when, they are judged as being fit for work in three months' time (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2011b). Given the aforementioned time-limiting of contributory ESA for this group, there is the rather bizarre possibility that some claimants will find their entitlement to ESA expiring before they have even had the opportunity to 'enjoy' the support offered by the Work Programme. Those in the SG will be able to opt into the programme, though it is questionable whether those with the most serious impairments will be given high-quality support if there is not felt to be any real likelihood of an imminent return to work, given the payment-by-results model in operation. There are also the possibilities of 'creaming' and 'parking', where Work Programme contractors might choose to concentrate energies on those most job-ready (creaming), while sidelining those whom they assess as having little prospect of a working future (parking). Importantly, maximum payments of £13,700 will be available for those Work Programme providers who sustain someone with the greatest 'challenges' (IB claimants migrated on to ESA) in work for two years (DWP, 2011c), meaning that disabled people are increasingly becoming a highly marketable commodity to which the practices of business must apply (Piggott and Grover, 2009). Despite providers receiving differential payments depending on benefit claimed by each 'customer' helped into work and related background factors (for example, criminal convictions, time on benefits), creaming and parking may well occur within each outcome payment group (NCVO, 2011). For example, those disabled people seen as being more 'job ready' may well be prioritised for support over those with the most complex of challenges. Welfare-to-work providers will be chasing profits and it seems almost inevitable that this will lead to some selection and indirect discrimination in concentrating resources where they expect to reap the greatest financial rewards.

Alongside the Work Programme, the government has introduced a programme of specialist support for disabled people with the most severe impairments – Work Choice – which has been commended for taking a holistic approach and providing personalised and targeted assistance (Wood and Grant, 2011). Unfortunately, however, the government has only funded 23,000 places on this programme per year, meaning it will reach only a small proportion of the total population which could benefit from such support. Work Choice was launched in late 2010 and the Work Programme in June 2011, so it is as yet too early to access detailed information regarding the effectiveness of these programmes. It is interesting to note, though, that earlier evaluations of the specialist programme of back-to-work support for disabled

people, Pathways to Work, were very mixed, while research by Citizens Advice has found that disabled people are typically dissatisfied with the back-to-work support they receive (Corden and Nice, 2006; Citizens Advice, 2010a). Furthermore, a government-commissioned report suggested that the Work Programme targets for getting participants into work look over-optimistic, with particular uncertainty around how the programme will fare given the current unfavourable economic conditions and unknown future state of the economy (National Audit Office, 2012). The report also noted that 'many fewer harder-to-help claimants than expected have been referred to [work programme contractors]' (National Audit Office, 2012: 9), suggesting that many disabled people may not even receive the opportunity to engage with the back-to-work 'support' that the Work Programme purports to provide.

In a move which has angered many disabled campaigners, the government has also announced intentions to replace DLA with Personal Independence Payments which will incorporate a new assessment regime, and is expected to reduce total expenditure on the benefit by 20% (DWP, 2010a). The government frequently misrepresents DLA as an out-of-work benefit, arguing that it requires reform as part of the wider project to increase work incentives and ensure that work always pays (Wood and Grant, 2010). However, the reality is that DLA is a non-means-tested benefit available to all disabled people with mobility and care needs. Frequently, DLA is used to fund adaptations in work or to assist people to finance necessary adapted vehicles which can be critical in enabling disabled people to maintain a working life. While the ramifications of the DLA reforms cannot be fully discussed here, it is important to recognise that the proposed changes may negatively affect the ability of many disabled people to participate in the formal labour market. Financial support for disabled people in employment is available via Access to Work but there are concerns regarding the reductions in numbers receiving this support, which fell by 14% between 2010-11 and 2011-12 (DWP, 2012e). Furthermore, confidence in the government's commitment to anti-discrimination legislation has been undermined by their Red Tape Challenge which includes the 2010 Equality Act in an ongoing review of legislation which imposes unnecessary 'bureaucratic burdens' (Cabinet Office, 2012e).

Conclusions

As the Coalition enters its third year in office, it is possible to make an early, provisional assessment of its approach to supporting disabled people back into employment, one component of its broader welfare reform agenda. In focusing on ESA migration, this paper has demonstrated how far the government's approach follows its New Labour predecessor's example in drawing on the tools of welfare conditionality, compulsion and sanctions in efforts to increase the employment rate of disabled people. Concentrating on the supply side of the labour market, centring attention on disabled people's employability and work-readiness, this agenda individualises the 'problem' of disability. Policy is focused on the steps disabled people must take to become employable, with a commensurate neglect of the steps society should be

taking to provide a more accessible and open labour market for all (Patrick, 2011). This is closely tied to an implicit rejection of the social model of disability, and an ongoing reliance on the medical model of disability which centres reforming energies on the supposed ‘problems’ and ‘deficits’ with the individual disabled person. The misguided supply-side labour market emphasis and linked recourse to the medical model of disability are the greatest (and most basic) flaws with the direction of policy reform, given that both rest on a mistaken analysis of the problem that the government is seeking to solve.

The government’s continued emphasis on paid work as the marker of the responsible, dutiful citizen is also likely to have exclusionary consequences for those disabled people who are simply unable to participate in the formal labour market. Drawing on contractualist and communitarian ideas of citizenship, the Coalition, like New Labour before it, employs a discourse which almost inevitably excludes those who either choose not to, or cannot, participate in paid employment. The right to work is recast as a responsibility (Dean, 2010), with (comparatively) hollow promises to support those who really cannot work, undermined by the reality that entitlement to that support also means being cast in a ‘passive’ role as a non-worker entirely dependent on the state’s benevolence. Almost two centuries ago, under the Poor Law, those judged deserving of state support were granted assistance but awarded the implicit status of second-class citizens (Marshall, 1949; Warren, 2005). There seems to be something of a return to this era in the current trend towards placing the responsibility to work on the large majority of welfare claimants, with only a small number judged deserving of unqualified support. Despite being classed as ‘deserving’, it is possible that those disabled people deemed unable to work may still experience a more precarious or uncertain citizenship status as a result of their position outside of the valorised world of paid employment. The Coalition’s reading of citizenship is also based on a narrow definition of work as formal employment, acting to devalue the many other forms of socially valuable contribution such as care work, volunteering and service user engagement.

If the government is to effectively support the ‘missing million’ disabled people into employment, tools of compulsion and conditionality will be blunt instruments without more emphasis on efforts to provide comprehensive, high-quality back-to-work support alongside further measures to tackle disabling discrimination and provide financial support to assist disabled people to work. Short-sighted reforms to DLA may have unintended consequences for the employment rate of disabled people, while it is as yet unclear whether the Work Programme will deliver appropriate and sufficiently tailored support to the hundreds of thousands of disabled people likely to fall within the programme’s remit. What is more, there is a need for holistic efforts to create a workplace which is more accessible for all, with ongoing work necessary to break down and address the physical, attitudinal and societal barriers which continue to make disabled people’s employment opportunities unequal. Without this support, and more attention paid to the responsibilities of the government itself to provide meaningful assistance to enable disabled people to enter the labour market, the

‘something for something’ promise will remain little more than a meaningless and empty rhetorical device.

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Ruth Patrick

School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, UK
r.patrick@leeds.ac.uk