

Blue Labour, welfare and Catholic social teaching

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Abstract

This article examines whether Blue Labour's critique of welfare states is consistent with Catholic social teaching on welfare, and, specifically, on welfare states, as has been argued by some of its founders, such as Maurice Glasman, John Milbank and Adrian Pabst. By examining their thinking on the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity, it is argued that their interpretation is open to challenge. This is because of the need for the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity to be held in balance with Catholic thinking on solidarity when considering welfare provision. Further, it is argued that Archbishop William Temple's thinking on welfare states was in no way inconsistent with either the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity or solidarity, and fully respected the need for strong, intermediate-level welfare providers to remain part of the overall welfare mix after a welfare state had been established – a view that William Beveridge also shared. The article argues that this is what occurred in Britain in the post-war period, when a partnership model of welfare delivery emerged between state and non-state sector welfare providers.

Keywords

William Beveridge, Blue Labour, Blue Socialism, Catholic Social Teaching, Maurice Glasman, John Milbank, Adrian Pabst, William Temple, welfare

Introduction

Is Blue Labour's critique of welfare states consistent with Catholic social teaching on welfare, as has been argued by some of its leading advocates, including Maurice Glasman, John Milbank and Adrian Pabst?¹ A brief exploration of Blue Labour's perspectives on welfare provision and Catholic social teaching on subsidiarity will help us to answer this question.

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Blue Labour is a term that was coined by political theoretician Maurice Glasman in a speech he made in April 2009 in Conway Hall, Bloomsbury, London.² Glasman defined Blue Labour as a rejection of neoliberal economics, while also being highly critical of the Keynesian welfare state consensus of the early to mid-post-war years. In his view, this was too statist an approach to delivering welfare, and thus antithetical to the bluer (Burkean/conservative) kind of socialism that he champions. Instead, Glasman has argued for a new politics of '*reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity*',³ seeing Blue Labour's roots more in High Toryism and the cooperative movement than in Victorian Liberalism or in the Fabian statist collectivism that came after. As such, he has offered the Labour Party a more conservative approach to the importance of personal loyalty, family, faith, community and locality.

Blue Labour's thinking on welfare states

Blue Labour's thinking has been highly critical of welfare states as a means of providing welfare in ways that are holistic, bespoke and personalized, seeing them as too centralist, excessively bureaucratic, impersonal and over-prescriptive in their universalist approach to the provision of welfare. By contrast, Blue Labour advocates such as Glasman, Milbank and Pabst have offered an alternative approach to welfare provision – one that is based increasingly on empowering intermediate-level community groups and associations in civil society (a key one being the Church), with more responsibility for areas of welfare delivery, which, since 1945, have been seen more as the preserve of the welfare state, including in education, health, support to the unemployed, shelter for the homeless and poverty avoidance generally.⁴

Glasman, Milbank and Pabst have often adduced Catholic social teaching as being a key intellectual influence on them, and on the shaping of their contribution to the Blue Labour vision.⁵ They like its thinking on subsidiarity. Essentially, subsidiarity is the Catholic social principle that central institutions, such as those comprising the modern state's administrative apparatus – including its welfare arm – should perform only those functions that cannot be performed at a more local level. It can be argued that Catholic social teaching on subsidiarity thus sits uncomfortably with a welfare statist model of welfare delivery, which is seen by them as being too centralist, 'top-down' or vertical, and universalist in its welfare interventions. By contrast, they argue for a shift towards a more devolved, 'bottom-up' or horizontal approach to welfare delivery, one that is rooted more in the particularity of local communities and their welfare needs, and which they contend is often better capable of being delivered by intermediate-level welfare providers such as third sector outlets. It is a view that is open to challenge as an interpretation of Catholic social teaching on subsidiarity as regards welfare states.

Catholic social teaching on subsidiarity and welfare states

Catholic social teaching is a body of thought that can be traced back to the publication of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891,⁶ although its roots in Catholic theology go back much further. It is a set of teachings that has many authors and sometimes

seemingly contradictory trajectories. As such, it is open to a wide range of interpretations, none of which can be definitive. Often, it is best approached by examining it in relation to the history of the Roman Catholic Church and its relationship to wider society. Seen in this way, it can be argued that – in the post-war period – the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church has seen its thinking on subsidiarity as being broadly compatible with the emergence of welfare states in countries such as those in Western Europe and elsewhere. It has, nevertheless, acknowledged that an over-statist approach can have dangers with respect to encroachment on individuals' human rights and freedoms (and hence dignity), which need to be avoided. Consequently, it has seen the doctrine of subsidiarity as necessary for putting limits on government encroachment into people's lives, while being wholly supportive of the need for governments to act when local communities cannot solve problems on their own.

In Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*⁷ – a document often adduced by those who seek to interpret Catholic social teaching in a way that appears to be antithetical to welfare states – the Pope, while referring to the need for the state to defend the weakest, and to ensure in every case the 'necessary minimum support for the unemployed worker' as one example of how this could be achieved, nevertheless cautioned against the excesses of a 'Social Assistance State'. He was critical of aspects of welfare state provision when 'they are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients', or when they overstep their obligations, stating: 'Malfunctions and defects in the Social Assistance State are the result of an inadequate understanding of the tasks proper to the state.' This occurs when the Social Assistance State operates in ways that have failed to respect the principle of subsidiarity, and thus have become too centralized in their activities, to the detriment of the communities that they are there to serve. It can be argued that the focus of the Pope's concern, therefore, is to avoid excesses and abuses of state involvement in welfare provision by way of applying the principle of subsidiarity, not to dismiss the need for it on the occasions when it can be seen as being the best delivery vehicle for welfare.

William Temple's and William Beveridge's thinking on welfare states

What is more, it can be argued that there is nothing in that premise that is antithetical to the thinking of Archbishop William Temple and his friend, William Beveridge – two of the key architects of the British welfare state. Both rejected the notion of an over-statist solution to welfare provision – a solution that insufficiently respected the need for voluntary and private sector welfare providers to be working in cooperation with state sector ones, in ways that maximized their respective attributes. Indeed, this is what Temple believed distinguished a welfare state from what he called a 'Power-State': that is, 'a struggle between the idea of the State as essentially Power – Power over its own community and against other communities – and of the State as the organ of community, maintaining its solidarity by law designed to safeguard the interests of the community'.⁸ Along similar lines, in 1948, William Beveridge, in his report on *Voluntary Action*, stated:

Encouragement of Voluntary Action for the improvement of society and use of voluntary agencies by public authorities for public purposes is no less desirable for the future than it has been for the past. The reasons for it have not been diminished and will not be destroyed by the growing activities of the State.⁹

There are grounds, therefore, to argue that Catholic social teaching does not hold that the doctrine of subsidiarity is inherently antithetical to either the concept or the actuality of a welfare state, and, moreover, that Temple and Beveridge would not have considered it as being antithetical to their vision of a welfare state. However, Catholic social teaching considers it necessary to ensure that an over-statist approach to welfare provision is avoided, thus welcoming the contribution that non-statist, intermediate-level organizations – whether private or voluntary sector – can and should make to the provision of welfare, often by working cooperatively and in partnership with state welfare providers.

Catholic social teaching on solidarity

Crucially, Catholic social thinking on subsidiarity is only one pillar of Catholic social teaching – solidarity being another. Solidarity relates to a need for people to have a keen sense of the common good: that is, the things that bind us together and enable friendships and fraternity to flourish and which, from a Catholic perspective, is a guiding principle that should shape everything that we do. Consistent with this, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

*The principle of subsidiarity must remain closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa, since the former without the latter gives way to social privatism, while the latter without the former gives way to paternalist social assistance that is demeaning to those in need.*¹⁰

Indeed, it can be argued that it is this duality of approach that runs counter to any tendency towards a reductionist interpretation of Catholic social teaching as it relates to welfare provision – one that places too much importance on a need for localist, communitarian methods of delivery in preference to statist ones, regardless of whether they happen to be the most optimal for meeting the task at hand. Rather, when it comes to welfare delivery, different ways of acting are appropriate for meeting different levels of need. As such, there has to be a balance struck between these two pillars of Catholic social teaching when it comes to the provision of welfare, which, in some ways, will reflect a need for a balance to be struck between state and non-statist contributions to the provision of welfare in a democratic society – indeed, a recognition of the desirability for state, voluntary-based and private sector contributions to the delivery of welfare to be working cooperatively and in tandem. In this way, they are more likely to fully respect the need for human dignity, and to serve the common good.

The British welfare state and the voluntary sector

I have argued elsewhere that this is what occurred in Britain in the post-war period,¹¹ when a partnership model of welfare delivery emerged between state and non-state

sectors, a model that was effective in delivering welfare on a large scale, and that was based on cooperation and mutual respect between the two sectors, as well as being wholly consistent with the vision for welfare that Temple and Beveridge had shared. It has been Blue Labour advocates such as Glasman, Milbank and Pabst who have sought to revise that history, painting a more negative picture of the workings of the British welfare state than is justified in my view, in their quest to promote their Blue Socialist vision of a need for more localist, associative and communitarian alternative models of welfare delivery to replace those currently being provided by the British welfare state. In this regard, Milbank and Pabst have asserted:

[T]he 1945 and the 1979 welfare settlements ... promoted impersonal universalisation and predictability. In different ways, both relied on the strong state and centralised power at the expense of intermediary institutions and popular participation. Certainly, both further fragmented mutual organisation.¹²

It is a view that is open to challenge, when one examines the historical record.

Certainly, the voluntary sector experienced a considerable amount of change after the welfare state was established, with some sectors experiencing decline and others expansion. Between 1942 and 1979, for example, trade union membership in Britain increased from 8 million to over 13 million,¹³ an example of an intermediary-level 'grouping' that thrived within an expanding welfare state. The reasons for the subsequent decline in membership to c. 6.5 million by 2008 and c. 6.25 million by 2022 are complex and multifaceted,¹⁴ including the near collapse of coal mining, major contractions in the manufacturing industries and the shrinkage of the steel industry since the 1980s, and increased legal restrictions placed on unions embarking on industrial action. However, the previous period of growth in membership suggests that its decline after 1979 is unlikely to be a consequence of the welfare state. Likewise, the demutualization that occurred in the mid-1980s of a large part of the building societies sector (it being one intermediate-level 'grouping' in British civil society that was separate from the public and private sectors), with several of the biggest names on the high street converting to banks, was a result of the 'Big Bang' legislation of 1986 that allowed building societies to demutualize if they could get sufficient support from their member owners.¹⁵ This had nothing to do with the welfare state or government policy towards it. These are just two of several examples of how major changes in the British intermediary-level sector that occurred in the post-war period cannot plausibly be explained as being a consequence of the introduction of the welfare state.¹⁶

Certainly, in *relative* terms, the post-war welfare state assumed more of the burden of meeting the expanding welfare challenges than did the voluntary sector. However, in *absolute* terms, both saw an expansion of their activities. This is evidenced by the rise in the number of registered charities in Britain and by the substantial increase in their total income. Their number had increased from c. 56,000 in 1948 to c. 120,000 by 1978; this trend continued, with the number reaching some 180,000 by 2008, before it plateaued in the period since then.¹⁷ The total income of registered charities also increased, from £12 billion in 1970 to over £50 billion by 2008, with the total assets held by 'general charities'

having tripled from £30 billion in 1980 to around £100 billion by 2008.¹⁸ However, perhaps of even more significance for our analysis is that, using the widest definitions of the non-governmental organizations operating in the sector that covers all forms of associational life, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations – partly in response to the launch of the Cameron-led coalition government's 'Big Society' project in 2010 – estimated there to be approximately 900,000 such organizations all over Britain, going from the tiny, local and informal to the huge and highly organized, suggesting that a 'Big Society' already existed in Britain at the time of the project's launch.¹⁹ This is indicative of a high amount of intermediary-level activity between the state and the citizen, in contrast to the picture Milbank and Pabst paint of the British welfare state as being 'at the expense of intermediary institutions and popular participation' and the cause of 'fragmented mutual organisation'.²⁰

It is also in contrast to the perspective that the historian Frank Prochaska has argued,²¹ contending that the British welfare state undermined religious belief and played a significant part in bringing about the decline in religious affiliation and observance in Britain in the post-war period, a view that Milbank has adduced as support for his criticisms of the welfare state and the alleged negative impact he argues it has had on the intermediate sector.²² A key line of argument that Prochaska develops relates to the decline in the number of women engaged in some charitable activities in the Church of England after 1945, which he contends was a result of its 'post-war enthusiasm for the welfare state'²³ and, in a sense, its willingness to hand over to the state aspects of welfare provision that had previously been the preserve of church-based charities. However, it can be argued that Prochaska's perspective fails to acknowledge sufficiently a range of other possible explanations for the decline in the number of women involved in the Church of England's charitable work at that time. For example, the post-war period offered much greater opportunities for women to find paid employment, to participate in expanding recreational activities and to engage in more accessible life-long learning, which would have happened regardless of the approach the Church of England adopted towards the welfare state. More specifically, Prochaska's contention that the decline in the Mothers' Union membership from 538,000 in the 1930s to 98,000 by 2009²⁴ was – in significant part – a result of the Church's embracing of the welfare state is also open to challenge. In the post-war age, after many women had tasted the fruits of working life during the war and the independence it afforded, it is hardly surprising that some were reluctant to turn the clock back. Additionally, the emergence of the feminist movement in the 1960s and the sexual emancipation that the contraceptive pill afforded women after 1961 challenged the ethos of the Mothers' Union and its traditional outlook on such matters, thus offering a further possible explanation for its numerical decline.

Conclusion

Contrary to Blue Labour's thinking on the British welfare state and the alleged negative impact it had on the intermediary sector, there is much historical evidence that supports a view that a balance *has* existed between state and intermediary-level welfare providers in Britain in the post-war period, a balance that is consistent with Catholic social teaching on subsidiarity and solidarity, and with Temple and Beveridge's vision of a welfare state.

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Notes

1. A useful introduction to Blue Labour thinking, one that contains essays by all three, is I. Geary and A. Pabst (eds), *Blue Labour: forging a new politics* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015).
2. See A. Stratton, 'Labour: now it's kind of blue', *The Guardian*, 24 April 2009.
3. For more on Glasman's thinking on Blue Labour as it relates to Catholic social teaching, see 'The good society, Catholic social thought and the politics of the common good' in Geary and Pabst, *Blue Labour*, pp. 13–26.
4. For more on this, see J. Milbank and A. Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: post-liberalism and the human future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).
5. For more on this, see M. Glasman, *Blue Labour: the politics of the common good* (London: Polity Press, 2022); Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, pp. 86–7.
6. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum: encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on capital and labour* (Vatican, 1891).
7. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus: encyclical letter on the hundredth anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (Vatican, 1991).
8. W. Temple, *Christianity and the State* (London: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 169–70.
9. W. Beveridge, *Voluntary Action: a report on methods of social advance* (London: Routledge, 2015 [1948]), p. 306.
10. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate: encyclical letter on integral human development in charity and truth* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2009), emphasis in original.
11. J. Forde, *Before and Beyond the 'Big Society': John Milbank and the Church of England's approach to welfare* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2022).
12. J. Milbank and A. Pabst, 'Post-liberal politics and the alternative of mutualising social security' in N. Spencer (ed.), *The Future of Welfare: a Theos collection* (London: Theos, 2014).
13. Cited in M. Hilton, N. Crowson, J.-F. Mouhot and J. McKay, *A Historical Guide to NGOs in Britain: charities, civil society and the voluntary sector since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 24.
14. Hilton et al., *A Historical Guide to NGOs*, p. 24. See also the statistics on trade union membership that were published in May 2024 by the Department for Business & Trade. Available at <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/665db15a0c8f88e868d334b8/Trade_Union_Membership_UK_1995_to_2023_Statistical_Bulletin.pdf> (accessed 15 March 2025).
15. See the Building Societies Act 1986 and the Banking Act 1987.
16. For more examples, see Forde, *Before and Beyond the 'Big Society'*, pp. 116–66.
17. Cited in Hilton et al., *Historical Guide to NGOs*, p. 25.

18. Cited in Hilton et al., *Historical Guide to NGOs*, p. 31.
19. M. Hilton, 'Charities, voluntary organisations and non-governmental organisations in Britain since 1945' in A. Ishkanian and S. Szreter (eds), *The Big Society Debate: a new agenda for social welfare* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012), p. 82.
20. Milbank and Pabst, 'Post-liberal politics and the alternative', p. 90.
21. F. Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: the disinherited spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
22. J. Milbank, 'The big society depends on the big parish', *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 30 November 2010, p. 4.
23. F. Prochaska, 'The Church of England and the collapse of Christian charity', Social Affairs Unit, 8 November 2004, p. 4.
24. Hilton, 'Charities, voluntary organisations and non-governmental organisations', p. 81.

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