

## It's Not About Charity, It's About Justice

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As we emerge from the winter and Covid-19 looks to have been tamed, the UK Government is now seeking to return to some type of “situation normal” and as such has been phasing out assistance to those affected by the Pandemic. However, the prospect emerges of life getting more difficult for the majority of us. In this context, the spectacle of a beleaguered and mendacious Prime Minister and his entourage being subject to a police investigation in allegedly having violated their own rules on Covid-19 restrictions is a mere side-show.

Indeed, for those of us in gainful employment or otherwise comfortable in life (maybe retired and on a good pension, for example) the squeeze on the cost of living we are seeing with petrol and energy price rises and other costs associated with supply chain disruptions to everyday commodities arising from Brexit and Covid-19 is noticeable enough to force us to scale back on discretionary spending in some areas on non-essential items.

However, for those in low-paid work, or having to live on benefits – which often is a combination of both (of the 5.7 million people receiving Universal Credit<sup>[2]</sup>, approximately 40% are in paid work<sup>[3]</sup>, belying the conservative stereotype of benefit recipients as being ‘lazy’ or the ‘undeserving poor’) or otherwise dependent on private charity, the prospect now emerges of real hardship and destitution. Although – to be clear – hardship and destitution is already a reality for too many in the UK.

Indeed, whilst the official unemployment rate is currently hovering around 4.2%, the number of working poor in the UK has increased dramatically in the last decade (with approx. 13% of workers defined as being in poverty; up from 9.75 in 1997/98)<sup>[4]</sup>, and those in precarious forms of work typified by the “gig economy” now account for over 20% of the workforce<sup>[5]</sup>. Particularly striking is that one in ten adults report being employed via a gig economy on-line platform (the use of which experienced a doubling between 2016 and 2019)<sup>[6]</sup>. Furthermore, since the onset of Covid-19 there has been an increase of 1.3 million workers who are in receipt of Universal Credit<sup>[7]</sup>.

And what is particularly noticeable over the past decade has been the increased reliance on private charity as the state has cut back on supporting the most vulnerable in society<sup>[8]</sup>. One key example of this has been in the growth of Food Banks, which provide vital support to those who, through no fault of their own, find themselves at crisis point, unable to manage financially. Research for the Trussell Trust, the UK's largest food bank network, suggests that people using a food bank on average only have £248 per month to spend on food, energy bills, transport etc. after housing costs<sup>[9]</sup>.

Moreover, 95% of those using a Trussell Trust food bank were **destitute** (i.e., they were unable to afford to eat or “stay warm and dry”); 62% of working-age people coming to them were disabled, and 18% of households referred to them during the pandemic were single-parent households (ibid.). In these circumstances, Food Banks provide more than just a set food parcel. They also offer targeted crisis support and a lifeline.

In more recent times, there have also been a number of Food Pantries springing up, for example, the Oasis Hobmoor Pantry<sup>[10]</sup> at South Yardley Methodist Church in Birmingham which one of us (Karen) helps run. A Food Pantry operates slightly differently to a Food Bank. For a nominal price, shoppers can access the Food Pantry, which is set up like a shop, to purchase both fresh and ambient goods. Those who visit the Food Pantry find that it offers a way to make the weekly budget go a little bit further.

The Food Pantry is stocked with food that is nearing its sell by date, but is still perfectly edible. All this food would normally go to landfill, which hardly makes any sense given that so many people are going hungry in our communities.

There is a real sense of Justice versus charity here. Charity in one sense says, “we have this surplus food, so here you are, we don’t need it, but you do, so, there you are, you can have it”. This way of functioning can often leave us feeling good, like we have done our bit to help. *Justice*, however, operates differently. It goes one step further. Justice says, “**oh, you are hungry and I have enough, how did that happen?** Tell me your story”. Then it asks, “**how do we change the story together in order for everyone to have enough** and so that everyone is empowered to flourish and grow”.

It is conversations like this that alarm the powerful vested interests opposed to meaningful change that can improve all our lives for the better. We have written elsewhere on how a Universal Basic Income<sup>[11]</sup>, for example, can improve the base material foundations for everyone, but the need to secure a **Just Society**<sup>[12]</sup> goes even deeper than this.

It is about ensuring that everyone can have a secure and meaningful life, and be “empowered” to take part in society (what has been referred to in the academic literature by distinguished scholars such as Amartya Sen, as ‘capability’ endowment<sup>[13]</sup> so as to enable *positive economic freedom*<sup>[14]</sup>) via free healthcare, free education, free child care, and so on – all paid for by a progressive tax system that fairly taxes *wealth* as well as income.

As the country enters a period of acute uncertainty and a harsher economic climate, it seems the imperative for change has never been stronger – and food banks should never have to be part of a Just Society. After all, it’s not about Charity, it’s about Justice. On this, we leave the final words to Emma Revie, Chief Executive of the Trussell Trust:

*“We know we can change this. We need to change the conversation around poverty and take action together. We need government at all levels to commit to ending the need for food banks once and for all and to develop a plan to do so. It’s time for government to make this a priority – to recognise that it must be an essential part of their levelling up agenda to work towards a hunger free future where we can all afford the basics.”*<sup>[15]</sup>

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***[1] Karen is a Methodist Minister based in Birmingham. She has Pastoral responsibility for two churches and also facilitates a small online Art Church. Prior to Ministry she trained in Interior Design, was a stay at home Mum and also worked for the NHS. Her interest in UBI stems from her working class roots. Having been raised on a Council estate by a strong Trade Unionist Father, she learned from an early age what it means to stand in solidarity with those on the margins of society. Her involvement with the Food Pantry has helped to deepen the belief that everyone deserves to flourish, and she feels a UBI would go some way to making that a reality.***

<sup>[2]</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/dwp-benefits-statistics-february-2022/dwp-benefits-statistics-february-2022>

<sup>[3]</sup> <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/universal-credit-cut-will-hit-millions-working-families-and-key-workers>

<sup>[4]</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2019-20-work>

<sup>[5]</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/15/more-than-7m-britons-in-precarious-employment>

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jun/28/gig-economy-in-britain-doubles-accounting-for-47-million-workers>

[7] <https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/covid-universal-credit-one-million-workers-101806950.html>

[8] The Trussell Trust report that the number of food parcels in their network has increased from 1,110,000 in 2015-16 to over 2.5 million in 2020-21, an increase of 128%.

See [https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/06/State-of-Hunger\\_Exec-Summary.pdf](https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/06/State-of-Hunger_Exec-Summary.pdf)

[9] <https://www.trusselltrust.org/state-of-hunger/>

[10] [https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/i-cant-afford-put-lights-22174426#ICID=Android\\_BMNewsApp\\_AppShare](https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/i-cant-afford-put-lights-22174426#ICID=Android_BMNewsApp_AppShare)

[11] <https://bcuassets.blob.core.windows.net/docs/coronavirus-and-a-universal-basic-incomev7-132345468703159905.pdf>

[12] See, for example: <https://www.quora.com/What-is-a-just-society> . The writings of which have preoccupied many a distinguished scholar over the centuries; from Saint Augustine through to John Stuart Mill and John Rawls.

[13] <https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=mOHnCwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA30&dq=%22capability+%22+sen&ots=HKJVPuf8Tz&sig=kmNJgtF6nU0a0t7vWnbtu1T6MpM#v=onepage&q=%22capability%20%22%20sen&f=false>

[14] Based on the notion of ‘positive freedom’ – as extolled by Isaiah Berlin in his classic (1969) treatise; *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press).

[15] <https://www.trusselltrust.org/state-of-hunger/>