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EXPERT COMMENT: An end to ‘want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness’: why the Beveridge report flew off the shelves in 1942

Professor of Public Policy at Northumbria, [Irene Hardill](#), collaborated with academics from the University of Southampton and University College London on an article for the Conversation.

It was a few weeks after the Allied victory at El Alamein, seen by many as a turning point in World War II. But when a dry, 300-page government report was published on December 1, 1942, people in Britain queued in their thousands to buy a copy. The Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services, written by William Beveridge, and commonly known as the Beveridge Report, would go on to lay the foundations for Britain’s current welfare system.

One man in London, quoted in a Mass Observation survey that month, said:

"It’s extraordinary the interest people are taking in it. When I went down to the Stationary Office to get it there were queues of people buying it; and [when] I was looking at it on the bus the conductor said ‘I suppose you haven’t got a spare copy of that?’"

Publication of the report had been delayed by several weeks as some of the cabinet of the National Government, led by Conservative prime minister Winston Churchill, considered it “too revolutionary”. Writing at the height of World War II, however, Beveridge declared that: “A revolutionary moment in the world’s history is a time for revolutions, not for patching.”

Before World War II, there was no welfare state as we know it today. Instead,

there was a patchy provision of unemployment and sickness benefit administered by a variety of different bodies, including for-profit insurance companies and not-for-profit organisations. This social security system had grown piecemeal since the Edwardian era. There was no national health service and only limited old age pension provision. If people fell on hard times, they could find themselves in desperate circumstances.

In June 1941, Beveridge, then working on wartime manpower requirements for the Ministry of Labour, was asked to head up a committee of inquiry to undertake a survey of the existing national schemes of social insurance and allied services and “to make recommendations”.

Many in Churchill’s wartime coalition government felt it was purely an administrative task to rationalise existing schemes. But Beveridge came to feel it should be more ambitious and should lead to fundamental policy change. The inquiry’s direction was strongly shaped by Beveridge himself, albeit with the support of a committee of civil servants, and the cabinet eventually decided that the report would bear Beveridge’s name alone.

Mass Observation, whose remit it was to monitor public opinion, captured how public interest in the forthcoming report and its role in reconstruction and building what it called “A New Britain” grew during 1942. However, Beveridge’s courting of such advance publicity for his scheme was far from welcomed by the government.

The final report proposed a series of measures to address “five giant evils”: want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness. These included a national insurance scheme to provide old age pensions, unemployment and sickness benefit, family allowances and free, universal health care.

More than 600,000 copies of the full report and its summaries were sold by February 1944. Beveridge addressed a series of packed meetings across Britain and on a tour of North America, where his report sold 50,000 copies within six months. A Mass Observation survey found that 92% of those questioned knew about the report the day after publication. The vast majority of those questioned during the first two weeks of December of 1942 had read and formed opinions on a summary of the report.

Reactions were largely positive. One 50-year-old woman declared it one of the few “good things to come out of the war”. It was seen as a possible end to

people's deepest anxieties. One 28-year-old working class man said:

"It would be all right to be able to stop worrying about tomorrow, or your old age, or what was going to happen to the kids."

It was also seen as an end to long waits for insurance payments from private insurance companies.

Putting plans into practice

Mass Observation reported a widespread public impression that the government was committed to implementing all Beveridge's proposals, and confidence that it would be passed into law, but a substantial minority voiced suspicions that the report would not be enacted.

When the report was debated in parliament in February 1943, the Labour Party declared itself strongly in favour while the Conservatives were deeply divided. Churchill deferred its implementation until after the war, fearing that the public would be deceived by "false hopes and airy visions". It is widely thought that support for implementing the Beveridge plan underpinned Labour's surprise victory in the 1945 general election. Clement Attlee's ensuing Labour government passed the National Insurance Act in 1946 and set up the National Health Service in 1948, in effect founding the British welfare state.

Since then, governments of all stripes have made changes to the way in which benefits, pensions and the NHS are administered. The most recent – the introduction of the Universal Credit system – represents the greatest administrative change to the welfare system so far. But concerns that new recipients still face a five-week delay for payments resonate with the desperate waits for insurance payments prior to World War II.

These administrative changes, hard on the heels of austerity measures and public spending cuts first introduced by the 2010-15 coalition government, suggest that Britain is currently experiencing an erosion of the welfare state. Responsibility for individual and community needs is being passed from the state back to individuals, communities and voluntary organisations. Now, 75 years after Beveridge's report, it feels like the UK is experiencing another "revolutionary moment" in the history of the welfare state.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). You can read the

original article [here](#)

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