

Memoir on Pauperism  
Alexis de Tocqueville

Welfare is a bad idea whose time came four centuries ago. But the beast can't be killed

Public welfare had a two century history when Tocqueville wrote about it in the 1830s. It dates from Shakespeare's time. When King Henry VIII split with the Catholic Church, it was no longer able to provide charity to England's paupers. Queen Elizabeth instituted Poor Laws that required each parish to tax its citizenry to support the indigent.

The pernicious effects were well evident by Tocqueville's time. In his opening paragraph he notes that even though Portugal and Spain were much poorer than England, pauperism was not that much in evidence. However, in England, one person in six lived on welfare. It varied a great deal from region to region, with more paupers in the richer districts. They could afford the tax.

Tocqueville notes the strong contrast between private and public charity. Private charity is not an entitlement. It is given at the discretion of the donor. There is no guarantee it will continue. Therefore, the recipients must show gratitude, and the donors are careful with their money.

Public charity, on the other hand, is an entitlement. Tocqueville visited an English court to observe what went on in the administration of charity. It was an endless stream. An old man, who probably had means to support himself, put forth a claim which could not be discounted, and therefore receive charity. A woman whose husband had gone to sea claimed charity, although her father-in-law could have easily provided for her. He had no legal obligation, and the parish would do it, so he did not. Several unmarried women, pregnant or with children, said they had no other means of support. Though they could name the fathers in some cases, there was no way to compel them to pay. Six stout young louts, well known for their drinking and gambling, demanded welfare inasmuch as the parish did not have any work projects for them. The magistrate noted that they were able-bodied and could probably find work, but he was not in a position to test the proposition.

That's how it was in 1830. Is it any different today? As Charles Murray [[ASIN:030745343X Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010]], it saps the morality of the recipient. As [[ASIN:0275949176 Richard Lynn]] and [[ASIN:B01K9109E6 Helmut Nyborg]] report, it results in the deterioration of the entire population as the unfit reproduce and the more capable members of society are taxed to the point that they do not, or find other things to do.

Tocqueville concludes that there is no good way to administer such a system and that ought to be abandoned. Nobody had the courage to do so. They still don't. We have expanded welfare to include public healthcare and it is experiencing exactly the same problems. It is the problem with socialism in every aspect. It sounds good on paper, feels like the right thing to do, and winds up being a disaster in practice.

