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Knights, knaves, pawns and queens: attitudes to behaviour in postwar Britain

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The choice agenda is currently one of the most prominent in public policy. One of its main architects, Julian Le Grand, has used the metaphors of knights, knaves, pawns and queens to characterise changing attitudes to questions of motivation and behaviour among public servants and service users. He has said, for example, that, in the immediate postwar period, public servants were perceived as public-spirited altruists (or knights), whereas service users were seen as passive (or pawns). It was only in the mid-1980s that public servants came to be seen as essentially self-interested (knaves) and service users came to be regarded as consumers (queens). However, this highly influential model has undergone remarkably little critical scrutiny to date. This article explores the debate over transmitted deprivation in the 1970s to provide a historically grounded piece of analysis to explore the accuracy and utility of these metaphors. It challenges Le Grand's arguments in three respects. Firstly, a concern with behaviour and agency went much broader than social security fraud. Secondly, the metaphor of pawns is inadequate for characterising attitudes towards the poor and service users. Finally, Le Grand's periodisation of the postwar era also has serious flaws.

One of the main architects of the contemporary "choice" agenda, Julian Le Grand, has said that assumptions governing human motivation and agency are key to the design and implementation of public policy. Policy makers fashion policies on the assumption that both those who implement the policies and those who benefit from them will behave in certain ways. Le Grand uses the metaphors of knights, knaves, pawns and queens to characterise changing attitudes to questions of motivation and behaviour. He has said, for example, that in the era of the classical welfare state (1945–79), public servants were seen as being motivated mainly by their professional ethics, and were concerned with the interests of those they were serving. They worked in the public interest, and were seen as public-spirited altruists (or knights). Similarly, taxpayers were regarded as knightly in their willingness to pay taxes. Individuals in receipt of the benefits of the welfare state were seen as essentially passive, or pawns, content with a universal but fairly basic standard of service. However, after 1979, claims Le Grand, there were serious assaults on assumptions about motivation and behaviour. It was thought that the behaviour of public officials and professionals could be better understood if they were seen to be self-interested. The idea that knightly behaviour characterised those who pay for welfare was also challenged. Finally, it was seen as undesirable that the users of services were treated as passive recipients—rather, the consumer should be the king. The logic was that the most obvious mechanism of service delivery was the market.¹

Le Grand admits that his analysis may well be too simplistic a means of capturing the complexity of the realities of human motivation and agency. There are many kinds of knights and knaves, and individuals are not simply pawns or queens. Moreover, he makes a distinction between attitudes and the actual delivery of policy, conceding that the postwar history of social security is peppered with the development of different forms of checks and balances to control the behaviour of people termed "work-shy", "scroungers" and "loafers". He notes that there was a constant tension between the assumption that welfare recipients were essentially passive (pawns) and the assumption that they had some capacity for agency (knaves) and would respond to the incentives with which they were

faced. Nevertheless, Le Grand thought it was not implausible to describe the bundle of assumptions concerning human behaviour that characterised the democratic socialist welfare state as one "designed to be financed and operated by knights for the benefit of pawns".²

Although it has been thought that the views of key thinkers, such as Richard Titmuss, were more complex than what Le Grand acknowledges, the highly influential knights, knaves, pawns and queens model has been subject to remarkably little critical scrutiny so far.^{3–4} This article ranges more broadly and uses the debate over what was termed "transmitted deprivation" to consider how far this characterisation of attitudes to questions of behaviour really reflects the 1945–79 period.

In June 1972, Sir Keith Joseph, then Secretary of State for Social Services, referred in a speech to a "cycle of deprivation", and a Department of Health and Social Security—Social Science Research Council Working Party on Transmitted Deprivation was established. The large-scale research programme that was organised through the Working Party from 1974 was to span 8 years. It cost around £750 000 (1970s values), and had generated some 19 research studies, 14 literature reviews and 4 feasibility projects by 1982.⁵ Given its focus on poverty, welfare, health and housing, the insights it provides into attitudes towards behaviour and agency on the part of policy makers and researchers, and the close fit between the chronology of the speech and research programme and Le Grand's chosen period, the debate over transmitted deprivation provides one preliminary vehicle through which to test Le Grand's metaphors and periodisation.

In the space available, there are five points worth making about the debate over transmitted deprivation. Firstly, unsurprisingly, there was a variety of views expressed about the causes of poverty and deprivation. In his "cycle" speech, which was in itself an early assault on the assumptions and achievements of the welfare state along with rising living standards, Joseph focused on what he termed "deprivation", and located its causes in child-rearing habits, large families, immature parents, overcrowding and poverty.⁶ At the same time, he noted that the emotional and intellectual needs of children might not be met "and this can be in homes that are

not poor and in housing that is not bad", noting that "there are good parents in poor homes; and bad parents in prosperous homes. There are good parents of large families and bad parents of small families" (Joseph,⁶ p 41). Researchers similarly noted the complexity of the question; levels of disadvantage were not necessarily correlated with poor living conditions. Michael Rutter and Nicola Madge, for example, noted that although overcrowded homes were twice as numerous in Scotland as in England, Scottish children were much better readers, on average, than their English counterparts. Rutter and Madge concluded that "if research into such cycles merely reconfirms that children disadvantaged in one respect are often also disadvantaged in other respects it will have failed ... This is the challenge for the future".⁷

At the same time, others were more inclined to give greater importance to structural factors than personal ones in explaining poverty. Inheriting the Working Party after the election of the Labour government in March 1974, Barbara Castle was careful to emphasise in an early speech that study of a cycle of deprivation should be in parallel with a broader anti-poverty strategy, asserting that there could not be any meaningful preparation for parenthood for families living under disadvantage.⁸ Moreover, the research programme took on an increasingly structural emphasis, and this was apparent in Muriel Brown and Nicola Madge's final report on the programme as a whole. Brown and Madge reported that many of the research projects had favoured a structural rather than a personal or behavioural approach. They noted that "much of the research concerned with very broad definitions of deprivation has inevitably concluded that disadvantage is deeply rooted in the structure of our society".⁹

Secondly, there was a variety of views expressed towards the agency, motivation and capacity of service users. Some researchers showed a willingness to engage with both structural and cultural explanations. This reflected the influence of ethnographical and anthropological fieldwork in the USA, where culture was viewed as an adaptive response to environmental factors; the disciplinary backgrounds of some researchers in psychology and psychiatry; the experience of the Educational Priority Areas; and an awareness that explanations had become unnecessarily polarised. Frank Coffield and his colleagues, for example, suggested from their fieldwork that the "cycle of deprivation" was too simple an idea to explain the complex lives of four families that they had studied in minute detail. Using a different metaphor, they concluded that "the web of deprivation, rather than the *cycle* of deprivation, depicts more accurately the dense network of psychological, social, historical and economic factors which have either created or perpetuated problems for these families".¹⁰ Their conclusions cast doubt on explanations that sought to lay the blame for deprivation either on the inadequate personalities of the poor or on the economic structure of society alone. Coffield subsequently proposed that "distinctions between structural and individual factors more accurately reflect traditional academic divisions between sociology and psychology than real differences in the factors that impinged on the lives of the people we studied".¹¹ What happened is that this more subtle analysis became marginalised by the structural emphasis of much of the social policy community, especially after an important paper by Townsend and by the election of the then Labour government.¹² These academics were influenced more by the rediscovery of poverty, the American literature on blaming the victim, and a reaction against the problem family and the culture of poverty concepts and social casework. Brown and Madge claimed to identify survivors they termed the "invulnerables", but their protective qualities remained elusive (Brown and Madge,⁹ pp 251–62, 333–4).

Thirdly, a range of policy prescriptions was advocated. Joseph acknowledged that poverty was partly responsible for creating deprivation. For this reason, he said, the Government recognised the need to increase welfare spending, introduce new benefits and improve access to those that already existed. Research was also needed into the dynamics of family poverty, the mechanisms and circumstances that led families into poverty, its duration and effects, and the forces that enabled some to leave while others remained locked in. Joseph therefore recognised that longitudinal studies were relevant and complementary to the cycle. However, in the meantime, his remedies were noticeably more limited. Apart from play groups and services for the under-fives, they focused on family planning, support for parents and attention to the needs of children (Joseph,⁶ pp 37, 39, 46). Brown and Madge, on the other hand, offered a very wide range of policy prescriptions, covering low incomes, the labour market, housing, education, health and personal social services. For example, they concluded that action was required not only to build and improve the housing stock but also to "tackle the question of the distribution of income and wealth in our society, which is crucial to the question of access to housing" (Brown and Madge,⁹ p 311).

Fourthly, the debate serves to throw into doubt Le Grand's periodisation, and his focus on 1945 and 1979 as turning points. It underlines important continuities with eugenic concerns in the interwar period, the focus on the "problem family" in the immediate postwar era, and the move to anxieties about an "underclass" in the 1980s. Le Grand ignores the longer-term preoccupations with rival structural and behavioural analyses of poverty that had been a recurring feature of at least the past 100 years.¹³ The cycle hypothesis illustrates important continuities in thought on poverty in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Joseph's language of the early 1970s, emphasising the rescue of mothers in inner-city areas, is reminiscent of that of 19th-century evangelical reformers, and his cycle hypothesis drew heavily on the concept of the problem family. This essentially behavioural explanation of poverty and deprivation, which emphasised household squalor, exercised an important influence over public health doctors, social workers and voluntary organisations in the 1940–70 period.¹⁴ In 1966, for example, Joseph had offered an analysis of low-income families, which can be seen in retrospect as a dry run for the cycle speech.¹⁵

Le Grand is therefore mistaken in regarding 1945 as a watershed—in fact, the coded eugenic references and the "problem family" theme serve to underline the important continuities in attitudes towards behaviour from the interwar period to the late 1960s and beyond. Arguably, the same emphasis on behaviour, reproduction and intergenerational continuities persisted into the 1980s, in the form of the "underclass" concept. Similarly, it is striking that Joseph's assault on the assumptions and achievements of the postwar welfare state came not after 1979 but before it. Although the cycle speech did not attract much immediate attention, in it Joseph did challenge many of the assumptions of the welfare state and the rising living standards, and was in the process of developing the ideological premises that would underlie much of the policy of the post-1979 Thatcher governments.¹⁶ The implications of this evidence are that Le Grand's metaphors and periodisation of 1945–79 need to be revised.

Finally, in terms of the "pawns" metaphor, the position in the late 1960s and early 1970s was not as polarised as it later became. In the USA, Herbert Gans had distinguished between the "situational" and the "cultural" views of social change. A Social Science Research Council Panel on Poverty had in 1968 identified six different poverty concepts, and while it expressed

scepticism about the culture of poverty theory, it opined that a combination of financial hardship, squalid environment, family structure and personal relationships might produce a pattern of adaptation characterised by particular time orientations and value systems.¹⁷ In reports on Educational Priority Areas, A H Halsey thought that the “poverties” in modern industrial communities originated in both the situational and cultural characteristics of those who experienced disadvantage and deprivation, and had their remedies in both economic and cultural reform.¹⁸ And from the perspective of PEP, Richard Berthoud had written in 1976 that “it is not possible to explain deprivation either *solely* in terms of the personal characteristics of the individual, or *solely* in terms of the circumstances in which the individual finds himself”.¹⁹

Some commentators claimed that it was only from the mid-1970s that there was a move towards explaining the behaviour of these service users by reference to broader structural forces. Roger Fuller and Olive Stevenson, for instance, later suggested that it was only when the radical critiques of the Community Development Projects had begun to appear that it became difficult to make a contribution to the debate over the cycle of deprivation without nailing one’s colours to an “ideological mast”.²⁰ Alan Deacon stated that this dilemma was shaped by the influence of Marxist political economy on the welfare debate, Anthony Crosland’s view of socialism,²¹ the upsurge in unemployment from the mid-1970s, and the growth of inequality in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s.²² There is evidence of intellectual voids in discussions of poverty, behaviour and culture—for example, after the publication of the Moynihan Report in the USA in 1965.²³ It might be agreed that the pawns metaphor fits well with this structural perspective and “denial” of agency, particularly apparent in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, identifying turning points, although tempting, is extremely difficult, and examples of similar “structural” perspectives can be found for any decade since the 1880s.

Overall, this article is concerned with testing Le Grand’s characterisation of the 1945–79 period as one designed to be financed and operated by knights for the benefit of pawns. A key question is whether the debate over transmitted deprivation is really one on the basis of which Le Grand’s arguments and influential model can be judged. It bears out his point that characterising attitudes to motivation is very difficult. Attitudes towards behaviour were similarly complex. Le Grand looked solely at health, education and housing, and acknowledged that the general concern with social security “scroungers” and other “bad apples” was a partial exception to his thesis. He also focused on democratic socialists; by contrast, Joseph might be viewed as an interesting but idiosyncratic figure. Overall, whether Le Grand’s depiction of the 1945–79 era and use of metaphors are accurate depends, of course, on further research into much broader aspects of public policy.

Nevertheless, the evidence presented here suggests that Le Grand’s model is overly schematic and ahistorical, and indicates modifications to it. Firstly, a concern with agency went much broader than simply social security fraud; there was a lively debate about the role of agency, behaviour and culture, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Secondly, the metaphor of pawns is inadequate for characterising attitudes towards the poor and service users. A similar discourse around “unsatisfactory tenants”, for example, seems to have been a continuous thread in debates about housing management in the mid-1950s.²⁴ These tenants were clearly not viewed as

passive victims, but as possessing agency, and as being all too capable of behaving badly. Thirdly, Le Grand’s periodisation of the postwar era is also seriously flawed, with much evidence of continuity before and after the suggested turning points of 1945 and 1979.

Questions are raised here about the adequacy and usefulness of the Le Grand metaphors, and their depiction of attitudes towards behaviour and motivation in the 1945–79 period that need to be considered in relation to much broader aspects of public policy. This article therefore opens up the debate on the motivations of public servants and attitudes towards service users in much broader aspects of postwar public policy. In particular, it suggests that historians might usefully explore the motivations of public servants, especially in the fields of education, health and housing. Overall, analysis of the debate over transmitted deprivation in Britain between 1972 and 1982 raises serious questions about the validity and utility of Le Grand’s metaphors of knights, knaves, pawns and queens for analysing policy development.

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