Like many in Britain, I have watched the New Labour government with fascination. I have felt eager welcome and revulsion, hope and despairing resignation. We have seen huge progress in democracy, with hope at last for a political settlement in Northern Ireland, devolution for Wales and Scotland, the reintroduction of a London-wide authority together with experiments with more effective local government structures, and the removal of hereditary peers from the House of Lords. Support for childcare to help women go out to work and an international aid policy aimed at poverty are notable advances. But we have also seen a foreign policy that follows America’s lead rather than building up other international links and institutions. We have seen an economic policy that follows the Tories’ lead in restricting capital investment to the level of growth in GDP and limiting public spending and taxation. Public-sector pay has been kept down. There has been no real strategy to tackle mass unemployment, and New Labour have put the meanest constructions on their pre-election promises for trade-union recognition and a minimum wage.

In relation to welfare provision, there was, of course, no reason to hope. Was it not a Labour government in 1976 which began the process of public expenditure cuts and the restructuring of state provision? Did not Roy Jenkins and Denis Healey launch an ideological campaign against state expenditure, defining it as an unproductive burden on the rest of us, the ‘taxpayers’? Was not Gordon Brown locked into the same conceptions as the Conservatives about keeping down the public-sector borrowing requirement? And did not Tony Blair appoint Frank Field, the Cassandra of the growing underclass and of dependency culture, to be the éminence grise of his welfare reforms? Commentators during the 1980s and early 1990s saw Labour as supporting a rights-based approach to welfare, with a shift away from means testing towards a more comprehensive social insurance system providing claimants with benefits to which they feel they have an automatic right. But New Labour espouses the same questionable assumptions that fuelled Margaret Thatcher’s revolution.

Part of the fascination lies in watching the endless minting of new terminology. The ‘Third Way’ is not a middle way between left and right, we are told. ‘Affluence testing’ is supposed to sound less harsh than means testing. But certainly ‘social exclusion’ is different from poverty or inequality. The ‘New Deal’ has no connection with Franklin Roosevelt’s great project of central government intervention to create employment. Typical of the new lexicon is the ‘Benefit Integrity Project’, in which thousands of people who had previously been deemed severely disabled were deprived of their
Disability Living Allowance. All this new language is designed to cut us off from earlier ways of thinking about welfare and from the social-democratic assumptions that underlay the postwar system of social insurance for everyone. It is worthwhile reflecting upon what New Labour wants us to take for granted. I shall concentrate here on two issues: the meaning of need and the meaning of dependency.

‘Stemming’ needs

Tony Blair has said that there are three reasons why welfare reform is needed: existing welfare provision operates as a disincentive to work in some cases; there is a lot of fraud; and, finally, ‘a system in which you spend more but fail to stem urgent need is plainly not working’. This last point sounds, indeed, plain enough. But then you notice that curious word ‘stem’, rather than the more usual ‘meet’. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *stem*: to stop, check, dam up (a stream or the like); to staunch (bleeding, etc.); *Meet*: to satisfy (a demand or need). Blair’s image is of the danger of needs overflowing their proper boundaries. It seems as if there should be no needs in the public sphere; their flow should be stemmed. So rather than state welfare being set up to meet needs, its prime task is in relation to those needs – ‘urgent needs’ – that are not otherwise met. It is like a host who makes it her business to engage with anyone who is lurking lonely in a corner, but does not otherwise take part in the social life of the party, meeting people half-way. Blair was expressing the fundamental distinction between ‘safety-net’ welfare and a collective social insurance system; he has repeatedly stated that the welfare reforms will be designed to keep expenditure in check without depriving anyone who is in genuine need.

As it happens, despite the rhetoric of minimal provision, Britain has a long way to go before it is reduced to that purely residual welfare state. In reality, there are a number of benefits – Child Benefit, National Insurance benefits, especially retirement pensions, and several disability benefits – that do not require you to have unmet needs. They are not means-tested and you do not have to show that you could not manage without them. A small Disability Living Allowance, for instance, is given to a man who cannot cook a meal or shave and wash himself, whether or not he has a wife who does these things for him; and it is given regardless of his income or that of anyone he lives with. So it does not wait, as it were, for the need to overflow into the public domain; someone can claim it even if they are well-off and well cared for. The government has been floating ideas about making Child Benefit and disability benefits subject to ‘affluence testing’ (means testing in a kindlier guise) but at present these benefits are the model of a comprehensive rights-based system of social security.

It is in the sphere of means-tested benefits that Blair’s language of ‘urgent need’ comes into play. Here the unit is the household, which is made up of heterosexual partners and their young children. Anyone else living with the claimant is expected to contribute towards rent and council tax but is not otherwise
part of the claiming unit. The current definition of this unit is part of the postwar settlement and is much tighter than it had been historically. The 1927 Poor Law Act made it the duty of a father, grandfather, mother, grandmother, husband or child to support a person who might otherwise claim Poor Law relief, so the means of any of these could be investigated, whether they lived with that person or not. By 1948, financial dependence was only assumed for children until they left school and between husband and wife (and heterosexual co-habitees). The underlying assumption behind the means test is that the ‘requirements and resources’ of the household can be treated as unitary. The needs of the individuals are not the concern of the state; they are subsumed under the needs of the household. The household is assumed to be a haven of primitive communism in which the rule ‘to each according to their needs’ holds sway. Apparently the dependency that is enforced within the family is benign and even desirable, while claiming benefits from the state leads to the dependency culture so bemoaned by the likes of Frank Field.

**Dependent upon whom?**

Since the 1970s, many of us feminists have campaigned for women’s independence in relation to welfare benefits. We argued that, as women are so often disadvantaged within heterosexual households, each adult should be allowed to claim separately, subject to the same tests of disability or availability for work. We saw that dependence on a man was demeaning to women and made them vulnerable to abuse, that they often had to resort to all sorts of subterfuge and flirtation to get a new coat for the winter, or even to get children’s clothes and toys. Our campaigns have been successful only in bringing about a formal symmetry, where a wife can claim for her dependent husband as well as the other way around – thanks more to the need to meet European standards than anything else. But, in general, many more wives are dependent on their husbands and are not helped by these changes. A recent study by the Policy Studies Institute has found that even in the poorest families living on benefit, men have pocket money for themselves, while women do not, and that where a woman collects Family Credit from the post office (which tops up her husband’s low wages) more of the household income is spent on the children than in families where the same total amount comes in through the man’s pay packet. Evidently, such families are not communal oases in which income from all sources is pooled and shared. Yet, far from recognizing the needs that are hidden within these households, New Labour has accepted Gordon Brown’s plans for a Working Family Tax Credit, which will normally be paid with the man’s wages rather than as the separate benefit that has often been collected by the woman. These needs, it seems, are not the business of government. They are needs that should be met privately, not the ‘urgent needs’ that welfare reforms should stem.

The imagined contrast between the benign dependency within the family and the evil of benefit dependency is striking. In all human society, of course, people are dependent on each other. In ours, the vast majority are dependent on an employer for their job and their subsistence for most of their lives. There is nothing wrong with dependence itself, if it takes the form of mutual interdependence. In practice, though, the employment relation and the benefit system are an exercise in control, in which workers and claimants are powerless and trapped. And yet surveys have shown that most claimants would rather be in employment, often for the intrinsic rewards of work rather than just for the greater income. In the myth of dependency culture, some forms of dependence – wage labour, family relationships, investments, rents and pensions – are seen as normal and legitimate, so much so that they are counted as independence. Receiving state welfare, however, is delegitimized by classing it as ‘welfare dependency’. Yet surveys of lone mothers have shown that a small majority of them prefer dependence on the state to dependence on a man. Some people even experience
it as giving them greater independence, in spite of the low levels of benefit and all the hassles involved in claiming.

Huge efforts are being made to push, persuade and help lone mothers into employment, yet a mother with a partner can ‘choose’ whether to get a job or to stay at home with her children. Even if the family is on benefits, only one of them – and it is usually him – has to get caught up in the machinery of job-seekers’ agreements and signing on, or the routine of sending in sick notes or proving incapacity for work. Why is staying at home with young children a viable choice for a married mother and unacceptable for one on her own? Looking from this perspective at current attempts to move lone parents from welfare to work, it becomes apparent that all the moralistic talk about the value of work to human dignity is really just a veiled way of speaking of the indignity of welfare dependence. Yet that indignity itself is only a product of the residual, ‘safety-net’ system of welfare and does not exist where people have the right to benefits as part of comprehensive social security.