

No one benefits from being on benefits.

For some there is no option. For some disability makes it impossible to work. For single parents with young, pre-school children, parenthood is a full-time job.

For those people, our benefits system is a must. The help the state provides is a lifeline. That must never change.

But for those who can work, in whatever capacity, the story should be very different. No one's life is enhanced by being paid to sit at home and do nothing. The welfare state must, for most of us, be a safety net and not a way of life.

For those facing unemployment, sickness, incapacity, relationship breakdown leading to a loss of income for a now single parent, our welfare system has always, in recent times, provided a way of keeping the wolf from the door. That must not and should not ever change.

But equally no one benefits from a situation where benefits become a way of life for those who could make a return to work. We do no one any favours if our welfare system leaves them with little incentive or pressure to return to work.

That leads to the absurd situation where over the past decade some one and a half million people and potentially many more – depending on which of Peter Hain's various statistics you believe – have moved to Britain to work, despite the fact that we have nearly five million people still claiming out of work benefits. We even have higher youth unemployment today than a decade ago, despite the billions spent on the New Deal to try and get them back to work.

A few weeks ago, I found myself in a conversation with a young hotel worker in Devon. It's an area which hasn't been short of work opportunities. Go into any pub or hotel across the West of England, and chances are you'll find at least some of the staff have come from Eastern Europe or another area overseas.

Yet he told me of large numbers of his former classmates who've managed to carve out a life for themselves on benefits, with only cursory attention to the process of trying to get a job. "They mostly play computer games all day," he told me.

Now I'm not one of those who believe that the welfare to work issue is simply one about benefit scroungers. The problems and issues are far deeper than that. But it is a complete nonsense to have an area like the West Country with amongst the highest levels of young people not in education, employment or training when local businesses have to import the labour they need from overseas.

But I do think that the issue of worklessness can be treated in too simplistic a way. For every person who's decided a life on benefits is what they want, there are far more who have been through a period of trauma in their lives and lack the confidence or the support needed to get back into the workplace.

Like the very large number of people on incapacity benefit who have suffered mental health problems and need well structured, gentle support back into the workplace.

Or the people for whom the job they have always done has disappeared for good, and they simply don't know which way to turn to find an alternative.

Or those who are suffering age discrimination as they look at new horizons.

Or those who simply have no concept of work in their formative experience.

Today we have proportionately more children brought up in workless households than any other country in Europe. That's bound to make it more challenging for those young people to get into work when their own turn comes.

We know that it is possible to tackle this challenge. We know that it is possible to get people off welfare and into work. It's been done in many other parts of the world. In Australia, many parts of the United States, the Netherlands and elsewhere a combination of tougher conditionality and well-focused support programmes to get people back into work have delivered real reductions to welfare rolls.

Gordon Brown spotted that years ago, but his solution has always been top-down state programmes that simply haven't delivered what he promised. It's a particular pleasure to be speaking alongside David Freud today. His recommendations to Tony Blair and John Hutton set out how Britain could take on board the experience of those countries.

Gordon Brown's first instinct was to reject that view. Now ministers are tiptoeing in the same direction. But their efforts are still much too timid.

We have 2.7 million people on incapacity benefit. Ministers privately admit that a large proportion of them could work. But the support programmes they have set up, particularly Pathways to Work, will only apply to new claimants and a tiny proportion of the existing ones. Yet Ministers still have a target of getting a million people off incapacity benefit by 2016. At the current rate of progress, they are running 25 years late.

That's why if we are to make a real difference, the whole approach we take in this country must be much more ambitious. In January we will start to set out in more detail how we aim to deliver real change.

We will provide much better support for people looking to get back into work. Other countries have shown that things can be done much better.

But at the same time, we will be tough on those who are reluctant to start working to get back into work.

We will expect people to take part in welfare to work programmes.

We will expect single parents who can work to start doing so as their children get older. A primary school parent should be willing to work part time. A secondary school parent should be willing to work full time. It's the right thing for them, and for their children. All the evidence shows that getting a household off benefit dependency is ultimately good for parents and children alike.

And we will expect people to take a job if there is a reasonable option available.

If they won't, then the state cannot be expected to simply continue to support them through benefit payments. David Cameron called it tough love. We don't think it's right to let people claim benefits to sit at home unless they genuinely can't work. They need to be out and about regularly, used to activity, used to gaining experience, looking for opportunity.

We have to return to a situation where our welfare state is there for those who run into difficulties, there to provide support for people in old age, there for people whose health lets them down. It must not be a cushion against the choices that most people have to take in their daily lives, about work, about priorities, about paying the bills.

We know that worklessness feeds through directly into social issues like family breakdown, addiction, child poverty, failure at school.....

We know that Britain faces skill shortages, and is having to import migrant workers from overseas to fill gaps in both skilled and unskilled jobs.

And yet we continue to commit vast amounts of our nation's wealth on supporting people outside the workforce.

In no sense can that be logical.

Gordon Brown knew it ten years ago, but he has failed to find a solution. In David Freud's work, and the experience of other countries, we believe there is a solution to be found.

And the next Conservative Government will find it.