

Benefit cuts agenda breeds working-class resentment, research says

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White working-class communities resent neighbours they think have gained from state favouritism, and not richer or more powerful classes, a new study says.

The British Sociological Association annual conference in London heard today [Thursday 4 April 2013] that researchers went out to deprived areas of Bristol and held focus groups in cafes, hairdressers, libraries, pubs and clubs.

The researchers – Phoebe Beedell, Professor Paul Hoggett and Hen Wilkinson, of the University of the West of England, asked people for their views on employment, housing, debt and immigration.

Ms Beedell told the conference that the researchers found "bitter sadness and frustration" and a "widespread sense of complaint and grievance" among the participants towards groups thought to be getting more favourable treatment.

These groups included unmarried mothers, [disabled people](#) living in social housing, and people given help after coming out of prison.

Ms Beedell said the reason for the resentment expressed during the study, in early 2010, was the emphasis by the then Labour government and the Conservative opposition on cutting benefits to those seen as undeserving.

"The UK political parties have appropriated the discourse of fairness to promote fundamentally divisive policies which have been popular with large sections of the electorate including, paradoxically, poor voters," Ms Beedell told the conference. This had continued under the current [Coalition government](#).

Ms Beedell said that this discourse promoted "increasingly conditional and punitive forms of welfare" which created "rivalries rather than building solidarities amongst those who have little, and drawing attention away from greater inequalities."

The researchers, commissioned by Bristol City Council to investigate community cohesion, spoke to 64 people in 17 focus groups. These were 90% white British, 62% men, 57% [social housing](#) tenants and 55% long-standing residents of their neighbourhood, having lived there for more than 20 years.

Ms Beedell told the conference that: "We were struck by a widespread sense of complaint and grievance which accompanied the highlighting of particular groups who were thought to be receiving favourable treatment."

One man in his 30s told the researchers: "You get more access to services and help coming out of jail than if you were a normal person."

A woman in her 40s said: "It's these young unmarried mothers – you say to them 'why did you get pregnant?' and they say 'I got a council flat, I'll have two more [children] and I can have a council house'."

A man told the researchers: "Council say 'are you disabled? No? – can't help you'. You hear of people coming over here and people get things paid for them."

Ms Beedell told the conference: "In each of these cases an Other is invoked – ex-offender, unmarried mother, the disabled, minorities, 'people with special conditions' – who is seen as being treated in a favourable way by the state."

A man aged 49 alleged that the council had been obliged to restructure some flats because Muslims had complained the toilets didn't face in the right direction.

One woman in her 40s said: "You get people who've lived here, their parents lived here, their grandparents, but when they tried to get a council place in this area and they said 'no' – everyone one of them went to an ethnic minority person and that is building up the resentment."

Ms Beedell told the conference that these remarks were typical of those in the focus groups.

"If these dynamics are at play in local communities, we are rapidly heading towards a parochialised and localised 'little society', a society in which the big questions about real social inequalities are eclipsed by little resentments, a society where the real and continuing divisions between social classes are obscured by largely imaginary divisions between neighbour and neighbour, and where discourses of equality are sidelined and suppressed by talk of fairness.

"Our research suggests that the 'fairness agenda' exploits a certain kind of resentment that is spiteful and vindictive. The unfocussed nature of these emotions has the power to ignite the kind of violence and disorder that was seen in the summer of 2011. By sidelining the more challenging discourses of wider inequalities, as the main political parties are doing, these toxic feelings are likely to fester, only to erupt again in the future."

Provided by British Sociological Association

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