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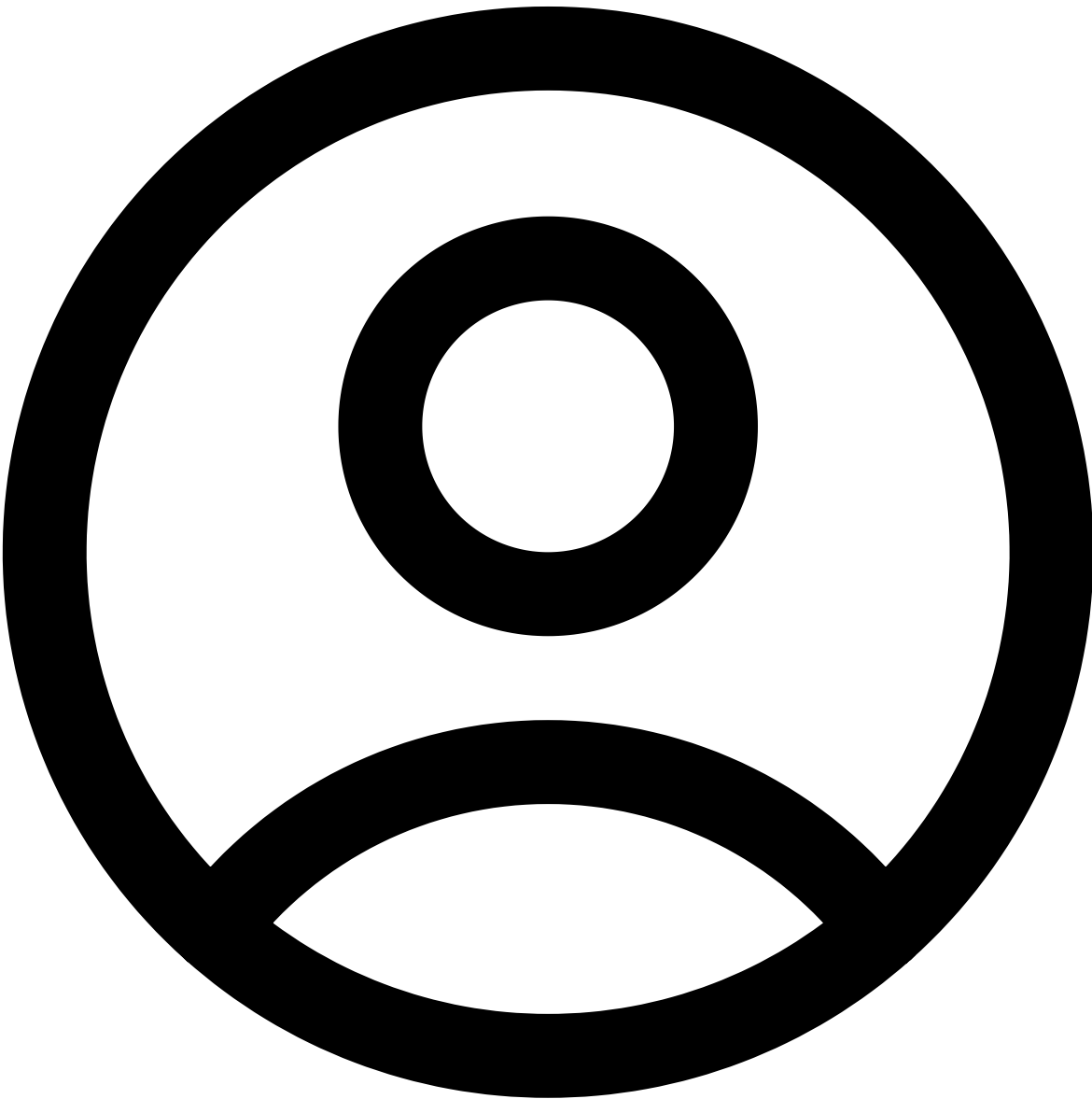
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Labour says benefit reforms are a ‘moral mission’ – it looks more like moral panic

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After weeks of speculation, Liz Kendall, work and pensions secretary, has unveiled her plans to reform welfare and cut the country’s ballooning benefits bill. The proposals include:

- stricter eligibility requirements for Personal Independence Payments (Pip), the main disability benefit
- scrapping the work capability assessment for universal credit
- freezing or cutting the incapacity benefit “top-up” to universal credit for new claimants
- reducing incapacity benefits for under-22s
- increasing the standard rate of universal credit for claimants seeking work
- introducing a “right to try”, so that people can try work without automatically losing benefits or being reassessed.

Kendall, along with her fellow Labour ministers, has tried to sell the proposals as a “moral mission”. Prime Minister Keir Starmer has repeatedly framed the cuts as a “moral duty”.

Cabinet office minister Ellie Reeves argues it is the party’s “moral obligation” to prevent “a lost generation” of young people being consigned to long-term worklessness.

I research the impact of how the media and politicians talk about welfare (and people who claim it) on public attitudes and benefit recipients themselves. In recent weeks, I've asked myself: what exactly is "moral" about welfare reform? Do ministers see it as morally wrong to leave working-aged people "on the scrap heap"? Or are they more concerned with demonstrating their moral duty to taxpayers – by cutting benefits for people they claim could be working?

The proposals do contain measures that back up ministers' claims to genuinely want to help people, rather than simply cut costs. The "right to try" guarantee should allow those outside the labour market to give work a go without losing benefits if this doesn't work out.

But if ministers are being driven by morality, I would argue they have approached the problem the wrong way round. The first priority should be not to cut the benefit bill, but to introduce proper support. This, of course, will likely push costs up in the short term. Savings will follow, but only if help translates into meaningful, dignified work.



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Starmer has pledged to stop a "wasted generation" of school leavers not in education, employment or training (Neets) missing out on the "the dignity of work".

But by hammering home this message with the uncompromising pro-worker slogan "this is the Labour party", he aligns himself with a specific moral orthodoxy. This affirms the moral superiority of his government's defining shibboleth, "working people", by defending hardworking taxpayers who feel it is "unsustainable, indefensible and unfair" to keep footing a "spiralling bill" for welfare.

The moral crusade to promote the virtues of honest toil is doubtless fuelled by surveys suggesting tough talk on benefits remains popular with socially conservative voters the party fears losing to Reform UK.

However, many polls are nuanced. A new Ipsos survey identifies a “[benefits paradox](#)”, wherein 37% of Britons agree that “ensuring everyone who needs health-related benefits” should be “prioritised, even if it means some who could work do not”. The same survey had just 23% favouring tougher eligibility requirements.

Moral mission or moral panic?

As my own [research](#) shows, when “welfare reform” agendas are couched in the language of “moral missions”, what is really happening is moral panic. We are witnessing escalating alarm at a perceived threat to the moral order that is [disproportionate](#) to the true scale of the problem.

True, the number of people inactive due to sickness or disability is higher than before [the pandemic](#), but suggestions that overall inactivity has reached [record](#) levels are wrong. Although a higher percentage of 16- to 64-year-olds was inactive during 2024 than in Germany or Ireland, this was lower than the previous year’s rate (down from 22% to 21.5%), and fell further in early 2025, according to the [Office for National Statistics](#).

Britain’s 2024 inactivity rate was also beneath those of 15 other European countries (including France and Spain), the [US](#) and the [EU](#) average. The true [high point](#) of UK inactivity came in 1983, when more than a quarter of working-aged adults were inactive.

[Kendall](#) has distanced herself from the language of “scroungers” I analysed in [my book](#) on welfare discourse under the 2010-15 coalition government. But connotations can be just as stigmatising as overt labels.

In endlessly employing the mantra “those who can work should work,” ministers channel timeworn tropes distinguishing between the deserving and undeserving poor.

Read more: [Getting Britain to work without blaming 'scroungers' – can Starmer change the narrative?](#)



A young woman in a wheelchair sitting at a desk at home, working on a laptop

The new proposals include a ‘right to try’ work without fear of losing benefits. [SeventyFour/Shutterstock](#)

There is a moral case for offering tailored, sensitive support to disabled people who want to work but face significant barriers – including inflexible employers and the pressure of caring for [others](#).

But this should not come at the cost of impoverishing people unable to work – as some unlikely critics of the government’s proposals point out.

Tony Blair's onetime Cabinet Secretary Gus O'Donnell told Radio 4 it would be "immoral" to damage people with severe disabilities "who don't have any option but to be on benefits". And Blairite former work and pensions secretary Lord Hutton warned that sweeping benefit cuts would "drive millions and millions of people into penury".

The government says its reforms are a moral mission, but they are already having immoral effects. Just how moral is it to terrify people already struggling to afford basic essentials with the prospect of being driven into deeper poverty? Or to encourage young people into work that is likely to be low-paid and insecure?

If there's one message we can take from the unseemly spectacle of leaks and briefings leading to this week's announcement, it may be this: we've been watching a government on the brink of losing its moral compass.