

THE CONVERSATION

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Work and pensions secretary, Liz Kendall, and the prime minister, Keir Starmer, visit Siemens Traincare centre in Crawley. Jordan Pettitt/PA images

Getting Britain to work without blaming 'scroungers' – can Starmer change the narrative?

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At face value, the government's approach to "get Britain working" marks a pointed departure from the toxic anti-welfare rhetoric of recent decades.

Both Keir Starmer and his work and pensions secretary, Liz Kendall, have been at pains to distance themselves from on-off moral panics about "scroungers" that stretch back to the 1970s.

This narrative has resurfaced periodically in the decades since. We saw it in the secretary of state for social security Peter Lilley's tirade against "something for nothing society" in 1992. And we saw it in the prime minister David Cameron's declaration, 20 years later, that "we're for the workers, they're [Labour] for the shirkers".

My own research shows that this scrounger discourse reached its most recent zenith under the 2010-2015 Conservative-led coalition, led by Cameron. It spiked in 2013, when ministers and the right-wing press sought to build popular support for a deluge of welfare reforms. These included a household benefit cap, the notorious “bedroom tax”, and the introduction of Universal Credit.

Against this backdrop, it has been heartening to witness ministers line up to disown “scrounger” myths since Labour came to power in July 2024.

In a Mail on Sunday op-ed, Starmer endeavoured to reassure “soft Tory” voters of his determination to drive down the “bulging benefits bill blighting our society”. But he swung from predictable lunges at “anyone who tries to game the system” to a markedly more compassionate tone, promising never again to divide society into workers and shirkers.

Likewise, Kendall pledged to end “the blame culture” around benefits. She promised to move away from “all that talk about strivers versus scroungers and shirkers”.

Department for Work and Pensions 

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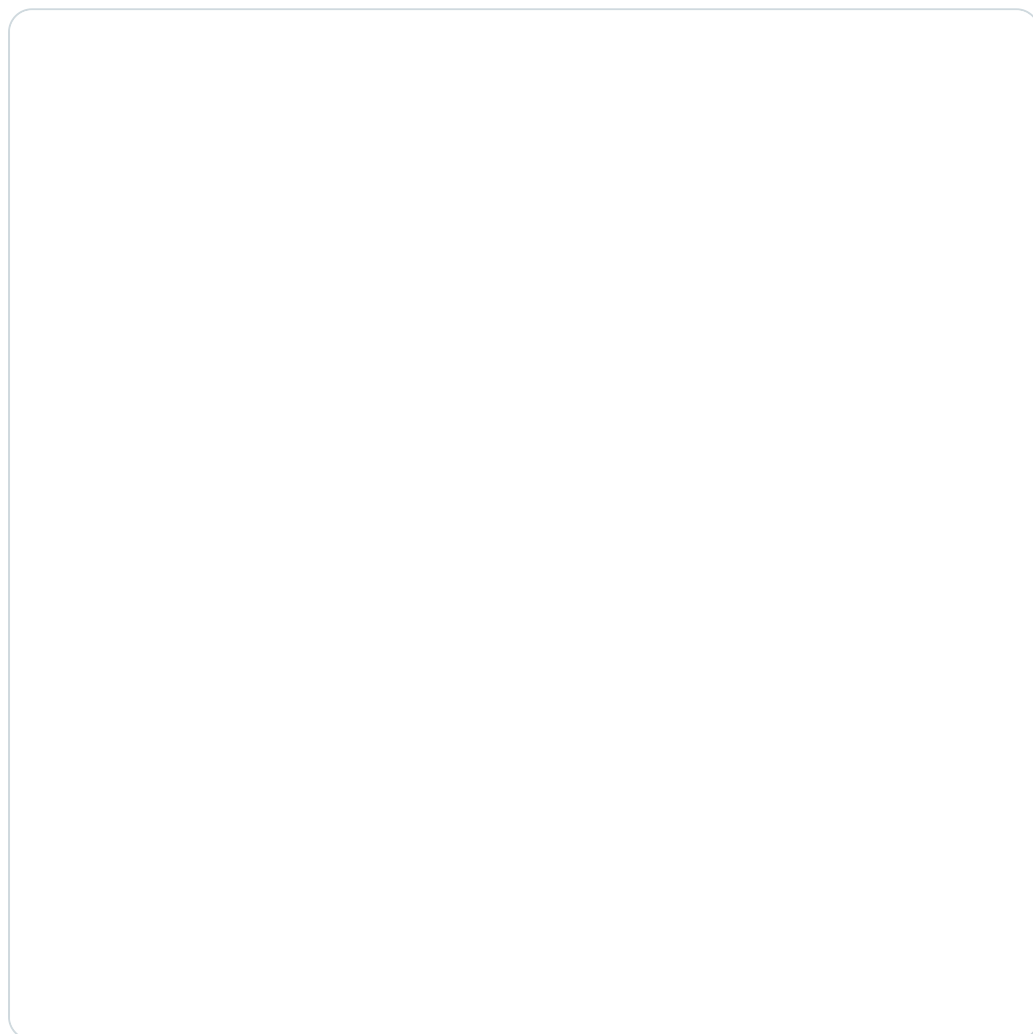


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More remarkably, in unveiling her plans to support tens of thousands of young people into work, the work and pensions secretary distanced herself from the label “economically inactive”. This is the bureaucratic term used by the [Office for National Statistics](#) to denote people out of work and not actively seeking it.

By describing this cold depiction of “human beings” as “[terrible](#)”, Kendall acknowledged how even supposedly neutral officials can other and stigmatise people who are struggling.

In so doing, she took a significant step towards correcting the inference that anyone not in conventional employment is merely a “workless” non-contributor. Labels like this are an insult to millions of volunteers and unpaid carers – more than a quarter of whom are classed as [inactive](#).

Mixed signals

Yet, beneath this progressive facade, there are disquieting signs that Labour’s rhetorical about-turn may only be skin-deep.

Aspects of the government’s approach echo harsher [back-to-work initiatives](#). Kendall prefaced her Commons statement with the warning that under her regime, anyone “who can work must work”. This is an echo of coalition work and pensions secretary Iain Duncan Smith’s mantra that benefits should never be a “[lifestyle choice](#)”.

A Department for Work and Pensions [press release](#) on the new employment reforms promises to stop “blaming and shaming people”. But it also warns that “people who can work will be expected to work”, and will face “clear consequences if they don’t properly engage”.

At best, the UK government’s measures fail to acknowledge the complexity (as well as the scale) of Britain’s burgeoning “economic inactivity” [problem](#), let alone the [deep poverty](#) and intersectional disadvantages that often accompany it. At worst, they continue to softball on tired Tory tropes.

Disability campaigners have noted clear contradictions between the government’s threats of “[benefit cuts](#)” and its assurances that disabled people will be given the support they need. Meanwhile, anti-poverty charity [Turn2Us](#) said some of Starmer’s rhetoric “deepens stigma and undermines efforts to rebuild trust in our social security system”.

Changing the narrative

So, who are Starmer and Kendall hoping to win over with their more compassionate overall take on the benefits debate?

In one sense, their explicit rejection of scrounger discourse appears to recognise the softening of public attitudes towards working-age people on benefits. [Recent studies](#) have shown the tide has turned after [many years of intolerance](#) towards the unemployed and “inactive”.

Since 2022, the worsening conditions of welfare have made it more difficult for the public to feel that claimants are “undeserving scroungers growing rich on government largesse”.

The pandemic forced many previously self-supporting households to rely, for a time, on state support. Despite longstanding tabloid myths about Britain’s over-generous welfare system, its benefits are among the lowest in the OECD. It is possible ministers have calculated that such myths no longer convince the growing number of people who have experienced it for themselves.

Young people’s mental health and overall wellbeing were seriously blighted by the pandemic. Many of the “hero voters” so assiduously courted in this year’s general election will themselves have children and grandchildren who are struggling.



The Jobcentre Plus on Finchley Lane in London. Zeynep Demir Aslim/Shutterstock

Finally, the UK’s highest rates of “economic inactivity” tend to be found in post-industrial regions, notably north-east England. This means that many “red wall” voters with long-term illnesses or disabilities are likely to be affected by reforms to health and disability benefits that the government will lay out in the spring.

But even if we accept Starmer’s sincerity in pledging to restore “dignity and respect” to the welfare state, how likely is he to succeed? In the absence of substantial upfront investment in a desperately frayed safety net, not very.

Kendall may talk of revamping Jobcentres to turn them from factories for “benefit administration” (and sanctioning) into engines of opportunity. But no amount of regional devolution or NHS integration will achieve much, unless it is paired with a fundamental corrective: the injection of more, not less, public money.