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The reluctant philanthropists: Thatcherism, the butter mountain and the welfare state

SUE KIRVAN AND ALAN TUCKMAN

INTRODUCTION

At one distribution centre passers-by thought that there was a jumble sale, or, closer to the truth, that the supermarket next to the church hall was selling off stale bread. On the off-chance of either some joined the queue. What was in progress, like at many other centres throughout Britain, was the distribution of EEC surplus butter. Throughout much of the country, at least those parts where the ad-hoc organisation of a number of participating charitable organisations could be established, such a spectacle was to become a regular event during February and March 1987.

After the first week more were to join the queues as people realised their eligibility, mostly by word of mouth through the estates and inner cities. Many thought that the distribution was just to pensioners, even though the government indicated that not all pensioners were eligible; only those 'in need'. Nothing was really clear. There had been very limited publicity through television and newspapers; what there had been were principally the appearances of John Selwyn-Gummer, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, to announce the distributions. But little or nothing was said on the local distribution; where people were to get their allowance nor who exactly could claim. While it was generally assumed it was directed at pensioners even this was qualified, 'pensioners in need', but nothing was said on the measure of need. It was up to the individual volunteer giving out the 'food aid' to judge the need of each person claiming. But, as word got around, it was realised that the beneficence was set wider if those entitled were willing, and able, to find the queues.

The free distribution of food by government (be it under the direction of the European Community), especially by one which has continually criticised far more minor interference with the market mechanism, does, in itself, seem worthy of some examination. It is clear that, from the outset, ministers entered the venture with considerable reluctance. Gummer - himself responsible for the British operation of the EEC instigated scheme - was particularly forthright in his reservations about the scheme. But this was not a case of a reluctant government being forced into a minor change in strategy by extraneous forces. In the

very operation of the scheme, longer term advantage, consistent with the 'Thatcherite mission', could accrue to this philanthropy. Now, with a third term of the Thatcher police, especially one where we are promised its caring face, the distribution of the butter mountain to the 'needy' is worth examining to assess the possible future of welfare. What the police's exercise in philanthropy beholds is, by the very strategy they adopted, a move away from the welfare state as the central provider of benefit towards greater demand being placed on the voluntary sector.

THE EEC SURPLUS

One of the immediate features of the distribution which appears strange is that the distribution was under the direction of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, with no direct involvement of the DHSS or local welfare departments. This stems, in part, from the origins of the scheme with the EEC and its problems associated with Agricultural surpluses.

British governments have been consistently critical of the Common Agricultural Policy, which has been responsible for amassing huge surpluses. But current Conservative criticism has drawn the government into a paradox. Much against its market philosophy it supports the price of agricultural produce by maintaining vast intervention stores. The contradiction that the government is in is that while they had to accept the intervention, which acts against the market, they were unwilling to accept a solution which would compound, what they consider, economic heresy. Meanwhile the cost to Britain of buying and storing the surpluses runs to £1,578 million according to the government's own Public Expenditure White Paper published in January 1987. As recently as 17th December 1986 the Junior Agriculture Minister, John Selwyn-Gummer, in answer to a Labour MP's suggestion that the 'beef and butter mountains should be distributed free to our pensioners,' argued that:

'If we distribute the butter that he wishes us to distribute, those who normally buy butter would not buy butter. It is no good pretending otherwise . . . the butter that those people would have bought will go into intervention. We would spend large sums spreading free butter round the country and taking more butter into intervention in its place. That is not sensible. If we could find a way of increasing the market for butter and of helping the least advantaged, we would follow it. I am committed to that, but I have not yet found a way of doing it.'⁽¹⁾

But on 19th January 1987, during a period of exceptional cold, the Community Agriculture Ministers used the weather conditions as the pretext for the free distribution of part of the surplus; a scheme which followed a similar line to that suggested by many of the Thatcher government's critics.

'the sharp fall in temperature in Europe has serious consequences for the most deprived persons . . . Community resources should be urgently used to help these persons *through the agency of the recognised welfare and charitable organizations* in each Member State . . . such action falls within the scope of the measures for the disposal of intervention butter stocks that the Commission is empowered to adopt . . . The intervention agencies shall make available to *welfare and charitable organizations, that are recognized as such by the Member State* in which they are established, butter for free distribution in that Member State to the most deprived persons'⁽²⁾

CRITICAL SOCIAL POLICY

This regulation on butter distribution was immediately followed by one facilitating the distribution of beef, 'free of charge for relief work and to charitable organizations . . . beef for free distribution . . . to the most deprived persons in the form of prepared meals.'⁽³⁾ The Commission's scheme was clearly designed as welfare provision for the needy at time of severe weather and was not primarily a means of making a considerable reduction in surpluses. As the Minister later explained:

'The idea that the scheme would make a major contribution or, indeed, even a partial contribution to getting rid of the surpluses in the CAP was not entertained by the United Kingdom Government. After all, butter stocks amount to one and a half times the annual world trade. They are equivalent to 10 months' supply for every man, woman and child in the Community. Unless one envisages the delivery of a quantity of butter on every family doorstep so enormous as to reach well into flaming June, it would be unlikely to make any real impact on our stores.'⁽⁴⁾

The Commission also allocated around £38 million from the FEOGA, the EEC's agricultural guarantee fund, so that for the ten weeks to the end of March, surplus butter and other produce could be transported to points from where it could be distributed to the 'needy' of each member country. While sceptical, British Agricultural Ministers went along with the solution. They possibly feared the political consequences of using their veto when, during the coldest weather in living memory they were under pressure over supplementary payments for pensioners' heating.

This doesn't mean that the government didn't still have reservations about the distribution. On launching the scheme, Gummer announced:

'It's all very well to say what a good idea the scheme was but there are implications for the British tax payer, and these have still not been fully resolved. The Common Market has a budget, to which Britain has to contribute, and the Government is determined to see that the budget stands.'⁽⁵⁾

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Despite the potential for beneficence, at no real cost to the exchequer, the government kept their distance from the distribution. At no time was the distribution considered a matter for the DHSS or for welfare departments. This was despite the explicit object of the EEC Regulations being relief of hardship during adverse conditions. Seen as a matter of EEC surplus foodstuffs the matter remained within the brief of the Department of Agriculture. Having defined the scheme narrowly as a matter of surpluses the government, or at least the Department of Agriculture, meant a further narrowing of the regulation. Following the meeting of ministers on the 19th January, knowing that he had these surpluses at his disposal, Gummer set about the task of establishing a system of distribution which would bypass the welfare state. Instead of liaison with the DHSS or local authority social services departments Gummer approached the voluntary sector, deliberately distancing the scheme from statutory agencies.

Interpreting the EEC Regulation for the relief as strictly distribution by charitable organisations, Gummer called an immediate meeting for related charities on the 20th January. They were asked whether they could distribute the butter and

other surpluses. With the acquiescence of the charities the scheme would not cost the government anything, except through EEC contribution. *Hansard* entered into the spirit of the exercise consistently dubbing discussions on the scheme 'food aid' which immediately defined the exercise as an act of private philanthropy alongside 'Band Aid's' efforts for third world relief. This was certainly not philanthropy on the part of the British government, all the cost was to be born by the EEC and the charitable organisations. The EEC would foot the bill to regional collection points and the charities would pick up the costs from there. The charities, not in a position to reject such an offer, although incurring the costs, were in no position but to agree. After one further meeting with ministers they were left to their own devices. On the 28th January the first butter was distributed, through Meals on Wheels, to the elderly of the London Borough of Enfield. Further distributions began elsewhere when, and if, the charities had the contacts, facilities or the goodwill of local organisations to establish it.

The government was therefore able to absolve itself of both the cost and problem of distributing the food mountains, drawing instead on the voluntary labour and resources of the voluntary sector; an ad-hoc system of distribution emerged. Where local authority social services could have acted as co-ordinators of the voluntary agencies and charities in the distribution this role was performed by charitable organisations themselves. The Minister for Agriculture's argument being, apart from the EEC's Regulation itself, that it was these charities – and by implication not social services departments – that had regular contact with the needy.

The national coverage on the ground of the Salvation Army, the symbol of Victorian Philanthropy, made it a suitable organisation to co-ordinate the volunteer effort through distribution centres in much of England. The WRVS and Age Concern focused on distributing food along with the meals on wheels service. The strengths or weaknesses of the distribution network represented the strengths or weaknesses of those organisations in any locale. In a well organised locality various churches together with community associations made their premises and their volunteers available for distributing the 'food aid' directly to the needy. This involved not just handing out butter supplies but providing transport from central stores. Those groups who didn't have vans of their own borrowed them from local schools or scout troops; in some cases boxes of butter had to be bundled into the back seat of the vicar's car. At an early meeting, in the area we looked at, a number of churches felt they had to withdraw since they couldn't provide the resources for collection and distribution.

DISTRIBUTING THE BUTTER

Since the government had failed to publicize the scheme, and had absolved itself from any involvement in the mechanics of distribution, it was left to the charities to do what they could with their own limited resources. Most added the food distribution to their normal efforts, in, for instance, meals on wheels or lunch clubs, for others it was an added burden on their stretched altruism. For the Salvation Army, their local organiser told us, the task of coordinating the food distribution to centres couldn't have come at a worse time of the year. As well as their regular activities during February they hold an annual appeal for their international

work. Volunteers were stretched to the limit, we were told, giving out butter in the mornings, working in their charity shop in the afternoons and collecting door-to-door in the evenings. The organisation at the distribution centres varied enormously. On one council estate the local Church of England volunteer members, mostly unemployed themselves, were doing all the work from their freezing church hall in the midst of roof repairs; their vicar described things as chaotic. In a more prosperous suburb three churches worked together to run one centre from a church vestry, each church providing volunteers for one day a week each. It was noticeable here that most of the helpers were women, their efforts coordinated by a recently retired couple.

Hand painted notices were affixed to church halls and, where possible, information about the distribution was published in local newspapers. Local DHSS offices were totally outside of the scheme and were not in a position to publicize the distribution or give any information to claimants or to the charities to define those eligible. At the start of the national distribution the DHSS informed all its local offices that:

'It is for the individual to satisfy the charity that he [sic] is eligible: local offices are not expected to provide verification of receipt of benefit either to the charity or to the claimant himself [sic].'⁽⁶⁾

The main source of information still seemed to be word of mouth. Some people were understandably late in realizing the existence of the scheme; others took time to realise that they were eligible. Some of the information regarding who was eligible was far from clear, the charities and local centres having to develop their own guidelines. Those on the receiving end of the 'food aid' were unsure, as were those giving it out. The government guidance to the participating charities was only that they should give a pound of butter per person, not even telling them the quantity of stocks available. With only this very vague guidance the Salvation Army were left to work out how much individuals should receive.

Uncertainties permeated down to the local distribution centres. In early weeks different centres in the same areas were giving out differing amounts. The charities or churches had no real information as to how many in any area might be eligible for butter - having to make rough guesses as to how much they might need. Some were to run out before they could meet the demand. Some were subsequently able to make up any deficiencies; others were not. Some centres were also uncertain as to how much each person could claim. While individuals were claiming, the allocated amounts were per household.

A married couple claiming together were given a pound and a half in some places or, as individuals, two pounds in others. This wasn't missed by those in the queues who knew what relatives were receiving from other centres. Certainly if a week was missed, and through ignorance of the scheme many missed the first week, then their allocation couldn't be made up the next week. While our experience was limited to one area, there is no evidence that this was exceptionally chaotic. In fact, given the circumstances, the level of organisation was impressive. But the testament of many MPs own local information in the Parliamentary discussion of 'food aid' vouch for these examples being typical.

The EEC were also to comment that there were 'problems of distribution of the food in certain areas of the UK, notably Scotland and England.'⁽⁷⁾ With this sort

of system operating the immediate parallel can be seen to be with the model of the soup kitchen and not with the general provision of the welfare state. This 'soup kitchen' provision not only absolved the government of any direct responsibility of the actual distribution of 'aid' but also allowed it to absolve itself of defining who was 'in need'. The model holds not only because no universal criteria were adopted but also because those claiming, and not receiving meals on wheels, had to be willing to accept the immediate hand outs of the charities, as well as find the distribution centres. Essentially the definition of need became the joint responsibility of the charities, in distributing, and the claimant, in claiming their eligibility.

CLAIMING THE BUTTER

Of course there was no telling what the many who had not turned up to claim their 'food aid' felt, those in the queues were those who had already accepted that they were the nation's needy. Even in the queues some felt a certain stigma. 'I didn't come last week, didn't like to feel shown up' or, as another person explained, 'people looking at you in the queue, its embarrassing.' An 84 year old man told us that he 'didn't want it - me family's made me come.' Feelings ranged from appreciative, through resentful, to angry. Many of those we spoke to were of the opinion that it was 'better than giving it to the Russians', but this was a criticism of the Common Market's policies not a sentiment of cold war chauvinism. Those old enough brought up memories of the war,

'queueing up for anything you can get. If you went to a wet fish shop they used to have rabbits, they weren't on rations so you could stand and get a rabbit, that would help your meat out a bit . . . someone told me it's cheese and dried milk this week.'

Images of wartime austerity were apt. Despite Gummer's claim that he was aiming for a system without 'vouchers' the first week they had started issuing all recipients with a printed docket like a ration book. Each week this had to be produced at the centre and stamped.

While there was widespread scepticism of the actual distribution most people appreciated the free butter they couldn't afford normally, or only had on special occasions. This was seen as a change and a treat. Most substituted the butter for their usual margarine using it on toast, bread or on mashed potatoes. One woman guiltily admitted that she was going home to make scones. The money saved, they said, would quickly disappear elsewhere. A woman suffering from multiple sclerosis and her husband said it would help out towards her diet, to buy extra fruit, or a slightly larger piece of fish for tea though she did say she was supposed to eat sunflower margarine really, so she spread the butter thinly! That they would have to spend this little extra on necessities indicated the severe financial constraints that they lived under all the time. In the circumstances none were concerned about the possible health risks of cholesterol. Misconstruing the nature of the philanthropy, believing that this was part of her benefit, a woman told us that she had worked all her life for this, so didn't feel any guilt or embarrassment. One man, less lucky, directed his resentment towards the government. Summing up the situation he told us that 'if Thatcher got us jobs we wouldn't need any of this.'

CHARITY ON THE CHEAP

Since the people queueing for butter weren't able to buy it, the effects on the market would be minimal. John Gummer had found a way to get rid of it which seemed to fit his priorities. The government were able to dispose of the surplus without cost to themselves, the bill being footed by the EEC up to the points of distribution and by the charities thereafter. As such they were not only able to defuse a situation wrought with political pitfalls but, at the same time, to bypass the welfare state and reconstruct the Victorian values of charity to the deserving poor. What's more this was achieved at no cost to the national exchequer. It is difficult to object to the distribution of these surpluses to those in need, at least given the existence of the insane policy which creates them. But what is disturbing is the possibility that the ad-hoc distribution instigated by the government might anticipate future ventures striking deeper into the very heart of the welfare state.

The importance of the scheme was that the government, through appropriating a strategy for disposing of EEC surpluses, were able to determine a mode of distribution which detached that distribution totally from the accepted apparatus of the welfare state. The very rapidity with which the scheme was instigated, and its origins outside of welfare provision allow the government's attitude to welfare to be highlighted. The overt reason given by the minister for ignoring welfare services was that they were excluded by the EEC Regulation. The Regulations presented as a piece of extraneous EEC Legislation to which the British government were forced to comply. But Gummer was clearly an active party to the very decision which formulated these regulations, claiming to have put forward a number of changes accepted by the meeting of ministers. The regulations as given do not appear to exclude the statutory sector in the manner inferred in debate and practised by the government department responsible for the distribution. While charities are cited explicitly in the regulation nothing in the wording, of 'through the agency of the recognised welfare and charitable organizations' explicitly excluded such agencies. What might exclude them is the interpretation of the government in that they had to be 'recognised as such by the Member state.' What seems absurd is the possibility that a member state might not recognise its own statutory bodies vested with the responsibilities for welfare provision. But this welfare scheme remained in the hands of the Department of Agriculture, deliberately excluding these welfare services. The DHSS, and local social services, were presented as a bureaucratic machine, the charities an expression of freedom. Asked why the scheme was not operated with greater liaison with DHSS Gummer argued that:

'We tried to operate a scheme in Europe which enabled the food to go through the charities that had a regular, continuing relationship with those most in need so that we did not have a bureaucratic system which involved saying "You only get it if you fit into a particular situation. There is that token. You must wait in line." We want a freer system which operates under the guidelines that we have given. That is the right way to to [sic] it.'⁽⁶⁾

The government absolved itself further by opting out of the very decisions associated with defining poverty in the United Kingdom. While the charities were given guidelines, these being formulated by the Department of Agriculture, the actual decisions concerning eligibility were left to the volunteers at the distribution

COMMENTARY TWO

centres. The minister's general response to criticism of their vagueness was always that the government did not want to establish a bureaucratic process by which individuals could claim. The discussion at no point considered individual eligibility for the 'food aid', so the ignorance of the scheme or the inadequacy of the voluntary sector to cope in some areas were enough to disqualify potential beneficiaries. More generally the scheme might indicate not how the third term of the Thatcher government might seek to solve the paradox of agricultural surpluses within the EEC but how it might attempt to resolve the problem of growing need for welfare while presiding over the end of the welfare state.

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