
The British Tradition of Poor Laws in Counteracting the Effects of Economic Deprivation

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to analyse the historical development of the British Poor Laws as a public-law instrument designed to counteract economic deprivation while simultaneously safeguarding public security and social order. The study emphasises the role of welfare legislation in addressing poverty-related crime, controlling vagrancy, and stabilising labour relations, demonstrating that security considerations were central to the formation and evolution of poor relief institutions.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The article adopts a qualitative historical and institutional research approach, based on the analysis of legal acts, archival sources, and scholarly literature in the fields of economic history, social policy, and public security.

Findings: The analysis indicates that the British Poor Laws functioned primarily as instruments of public security and social control rather than as a system of social protection in the contemporary sense. Welfare provisions were closely linked to mechanisms that restricted population mobility, criminalised vagrancy, and enforced compulsory labour.

Practical implications: The findings offer historical insights relevant to contemporary debates on social policy and public security. They demonstrate that welfare systems designed primarily around security and fiscal discipline may generate long-term risks of social exclusion and dependency, which remain relevant for modern policymakers addressing poverty-related crime and social instability.

Originality/Value: The article contributes to the literature by integrating analyses of welfare law, public security, and economic development. By highlighting the security-driven logic underlying the British Poor Laws, the study provides a deeper understanding of the institutional foundations of modern social security systems and the enduring tension between protection and control.

Keywords: Public security, Poor Laws, economic deprivation, social control, crime prevention.

JEL classification: N33, H53, K14, K42.

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1. Introduction

In every community, there are people who, due to age or health, are unable to meet their basic needs. Such people are at risk of poverty. This risk has existed throughout history, and attempts to counteract it have been made through law, customs, and religious precepts. In the period of primitive society, family support replaced institutional support, and the catastrophic individual and social consequences of 'random events were covered by the collective efforts of the entire community' (Kowalewski, 2002).

With the birth of statehood – for apparent reasons – legal institutions appeared, in forms far removed from those we know today, to protect citizens from crime, which is often caused not only by a lack of moral principles, laziness, greed and other acquired or innate vices, but also by common poverty resulting from a lack of earning opportunities. The tribunes of the people sought to remedy this problem by instituting an obligation to support people with low incomes.

This oldest form of public charity (*frumentationes, alimenta*), dating back to the era of the Gracchi in the Roman Republic, was sanctified by custom and widely accepted, even though the state system and its institutions were changing. From the 4th century onwards, a network of hospices (Szot, 2009) began to emerge along the main transport routes, where, following the example of the Good Samaritan, not only travellers, itinerant merchants and pilgrims found shelter, but also the destitute rejected by society (the sick, the disabled, homeless and abandoned children, and older adults unable to work) found shelter.

Due to the surge in pilgrimage, these facilities were most densely concentrated along the routes pilgrims took to the Holy Land. The first regulations concerning hospices as shelters for the poor were passed by the Council of Nicaea in 325, but the permanent material and financial foundations for their operation were only established after the reforms of Gregory I the Great (540-604), who ordered that a quarter of the clergy's income be given to the needy (Czuj, 1948; Miciuła, 2016). In the 11th-13th centuries, during the Crusades, specialised welfare foundations (*xenochodium, domus hospitalis, ptôchia*) appeared; religious orders played the most critical role in their establishment.

In modern times, care for the poor was provided not only by church foundations and monasteries, but also by guilds, masopores and other community organisations. Characteristically, in pre-industrial Europe, social security was primarily a function of class affiliation; Christians excluded from the community could rely on the Church's charitable activities and private philanthropy, whereas dissenters could rely only on their own resources.

Philanthropy, unlike the Church's philanthropic activities, which stemmed from the commandment of mercy, is a secular idea inspired by humanitarianism rather than by

religious precepts (e.g., Catholic charity, Muslim zakat, or tzedakah in Judaism). However, it was not charity and mercy, but pragmatism and determinism in combating common banditry and organised crime that formed the basis of the Tudor English 'poor law' – the oldest systemic public-law institution, which has left an indelible mark on the methods used to this day to protect against the risk of income deprivation in our contemporary social security systems.

2. Vagrancy as a Threat to Social Peace in England

Almost since the time of William the Conqueror, one of the greatest threats to public safety in England has been the aristocracy, competing with one another for wealth and influence, and outlaws who had nothing to lose. This was how individuals living outside the law and beyond all social norms were described. 'These people operated in gangs, sowed chaos, committed kidnappings and murders to dominate a given region and fight, or possibly marginalise, the local justice system' (Molendowski, 2025).

The monarchs of the time tried to combat organised crime by equipping local authorities with appropriate legal instruments and powers. From the 11th century onwards, the territory of England was divided into counties and smaller districts (hundreds), which constituted the jurisdiction of the local authorities.

At least once a month, a court was held in the hundred, where most of the civil cases of the local community were decided, while criminal cases were heard and judged twice a year; in such cases, the meetings were presided over by the sheriff, as the official responsible for enforcing law and order. The sheriff was assisted by coroners – three or four per county.

The most important official was the justice of the peace – usually a nobleman of 'unblemished reputation', supported by law enforcement and the clergy. Over time, hundreds of parishes lost their importance and were eventually abolished in the mid-19th century. The parish was the basic administrative unit (equivalent to a municipality), which made it challenging to provide assistance in large urban areas and in scattered villages in the north and west.

This was one of the reasons for the passivity of the state apparatus, which rarely intervened in the plebeian living conditions, even during natural disasters and humanitarian catastrophes. The deprivation of necessities led to an unprecedented spread of property crimes, disease, infanticide and other pathologies, but also to popular uprisings, which were bloodily suppressed, followed by even greater oppression.

The Great Famine (1315-1322) and the plague epidemic that followed shortly thereafter (1348) ravaged the country, killing, according to estimates, at least one-third of the population. Soon after, the country became embroiled in the Hundred

Years' War (1337-1453), which entailed enormous expenses for maintaining the army and, in turn, ever-higher taxes. In 1381, Walt Tyler's uprising broke out in response to the imposition of a poll tax, the reintroduction of serfdom and the setting of low wages for labourers. These were the immediate causes, but the leading cause lay in the high costs of the Hundred Years' War and the exploitation of the plebs, as a result of which radical slogans preached by itinerant preachers spread.

In 1386-1387, the nobles rebelled against the rule of Richard II. While the peasant rebellion was dealt with brutally and quickly, the barons' rebellion had more long-term consequences. The king, compelled by the Wonderful Parliament to execute his supporters, thereafter avoided conflicts with the magnates, while at the same time attempting to impede their recruitment of mercenaries by imposing controls on the movement of people.

The first surviving document that initiated the legislative process, culminating in the creation of the 'poor law', is the Cambridge Statute of 1388. This statute prohibited residents (under penalty of arrest and deportation) from leaving the city or municipality without a certificate from a justice of the peace showing a valid reason for going.

This primarily affected people experiencing poverty who travelled the country in the hope of receiving alms. To alleviate their plight and give them a chance to avoid starvation, each county had a statutory obligation to 'relieve' its own poor who were unable to work due to age or infirmity.

The fight against crime in England was hampered by its distinctly clan-like nature; about a third of organised robber bands consisted of entire families – husbands and wives, brothers, sometimes even sisters (Mortimer, 2017). A fundamental condition for improving public safety was to restrict further the mobility of criminals and all kinds of social outcasts, who were recruited into their armies by pretenders to the throne, causing chaos throughout the kingdom.

Henry VII Tudor (whose claim to the throne was controversial) managed to defeat Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in this way, consolidating his monarchical power by marrying Elizabeth of York, putting an end to the War of the Roses (1455-1485), and at the same time ensured that the magnates had less opportunity to create their own armies.

On the initiative of Henry VII, the English Parliament passed the Vagabonds and Beggars Act in 1494, which stated: "Vagabonds, idlers and suspects shall be placed in stocks for three days and three nights and shall have no other food than bread and water, and then they shall be expelled from the city. Every beggar fit for work should go to the town where he last lived, where he is best known or where he was born, and remain there under the above-mentioned penalty." The 'helpless' poor (too weak to work) could remain in their town with the right to beg; their existence depended almost

entirely on the charitable activities of religious orders and – as mandated by the Church – the philanthropy of the laity.

From 1531, justices of the peace issued licences to beg to the ‘powerless poor’, while vagrants considered to be loafers were punished with imprisonment and flogging before being deported to their place of birth.

3. The Dramatic Consequences of the Secularisation of Monastic Property

The reign of Henry VII brought England relative prosperity (for the time). However, the accumulated resources were quickly squandered by his son and successor, the warlike Henry VIII, who competed with France and Spain for supremacy and was obsessed with having a male heir. His overwhelming desire to marry Anne Boleyn, coupled with his inability to obtain a divorce from Catherine of Aragon and his interest in the Reformation, led this despotic monarch to break ties with the Roman Catholic Church (Act of Supremacy of 1534).

Henry VIII, assuming the title of head of the Church in England, retained the episcopal system and many Catholic principles. Anglican identity is based more on a common liturgy with great restraint in resolving theological issues. The incompleteness of the English Reformation and its top-down nature meant that new communities were constantly emerging in England to further the Reformation – Puritans, Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, Darbyists.

The rulers of England were eager to get rid of dissidents from the Church of England, facilitating their resettlement in the American colonies (or forcing them to emigrate) and seizing their property. However, the most serious consequence of the English Reformation was the dissolution of monasteries and the unprecedented plundering of their wealth by the king himself and a small group of privileged aristocrats (Bernard, 2011).

As a result of wars, religious persecution and the secularisation of church property, the economic situation of not only the plebs, but also the middle and upper classes of English society deteriorated significantly. With it, crime, including organised crime, increased.

The gap caused by the liquidation of monasteries was to be filled by the 1535 Act, which ordered that "all administrators of districts, cities, towns, districts, hamlets and parishes find and maintain every elderly, poor and helpless person who was born or had lived for three years in the same district, by way of voluntary and charitable alms"; this provision was extended to orphaned and abandoned children aged 5 to 13, but older children and adults capable of work were physically forced to do so.

Attempts to provide administrative care for the ‘helpless poor’ did not alleviate social unrest; 40,000 people from all walks of life living in the northern counties expressed

their protest against religious reforms and the new order in a popular uprising in 1536-1537 – the Pilgrimage of Grace (Pilgrimage of Grace). The bloody suppression of this uprising and the terror of the following years resulted in the authorities treating every non-disabled person who evaded work in the community – often not without reason – as a potential criminal, and criminal law was tightened.

A law passed in 1547 (during the reign of the minor Edward VI) required that every vagrant, after being branded with the letter V in his ear, be imprisoned for two years. If he did not submit and escaped, he would be punished with life imprisonment for the first attempt at escape and death for the second.

Three years later, due to a severe labour shortage following the 'English sweating sickness' epidemic, the death penalty for vagrancy was abolished, but imprisonment and forced labour were maintained. To strengthen administrative control over the impoverished population, a register of the poor living at the parish's expense (Registers of the Poor) was introduced in 1552.

Under the rule of the thrifty and peace-loving Elizabeth I, despite the turbulent struggles to retain the throne, the general standard of living in England improved, accompanied by a high (for the time) birth rate. During the 16th century, the population grew from 2.2 to 4.5 million (Guy, 1988), which, given the limited demand for labour, led to an increase in the number of poor people; moreover, not everyone wanted or was able to earn a living.

In addition to demographic factors, economic factors contributed to exclusion from the labour market, such as the enclosure of pastures. The growing demand for English wool by Dutch manufacturers and domestic weaving workshops led to the seizure of communal land (used by peasants to graze dairy cattle and horses and for other purposes) and the termination of lease agreements to convert farmland into sheep pastures.

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The number of poor townspeople increased because low labour productivity hampered nominal wage increases that kept pace with rising living costs. For example, between 1475 and 1620, food prices in London rose 5.5-fold, craft goods 2.5-fold, and bricklayers' wages 2-fold.

The area of poverty also expanded due to unfavourable external circumstances, such as the debasement of the currency by the king to fill the coffers, the currency's depreciation caused by the influx of Spanish gold plundered from the Incas and other Indian tribes, natural disasters, and recurring epidemics—moreover, the termination of lease agreements in order to convert farmland into sheep pastures.

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4. Elizabethan Poor Law in the Face of the Challenges of the Era

Following the progressive impoverishment of small tenants, wage earners and other groups of the population, the army of beggars grew rapidly. In these circumstances, parishes were ordered to register their poor, parish councils were obliged to provide material assistance to the poor, and parish priests were to admonish their parishioners to show charity to their poor neighbours.

Each parish appointed two treasurers whose task was, after the service on Trinity Sunday, to 'gently ask and demand from every man or woman what they would be willing to give from their charity to provide weekly support for the poor registered in the parish'. Donors were not particularly generous, and the number of poor people continued to grow as the process of dispossessing tenants and seizing pastures accelerated. In the spring of 1549, this led to the outbreak of another peasant war, led by the Kett brothers, Robert and William.

The rebels destroyed the fences of communal lands and plundered the wealthy landowners. Robert Kett, with his 16,000-strong army, took Norwich by force, but was soon defeated in a battle on 27 August 1549 by the better-armed and more experienced troops of John Dudley. The Kett brothers and other leaders of the uprising were severely punished, yet their memory as national heroes has endured.

A school in Wymondham, Norfolk, was named after Kett, and the uprising and Robert Kett himself were glorified in the bestseller by the English writer C.J. Sansom, titled 'Heart of England', which was also published in Poland. The uprising had the positive effect that, instead of voluntary donations to people experiencing poverty, a compulsory levy was introduced in 1552, collected initially once a year and then weekly from 1562 onwards.

Justices of the peace enforced the contribution to support the poor from parishioners who failed to pay on time or made delayed payments. Refusal to participate in the aid fund was theoretically punishable by imprisonment, but until the Vagabonds Act came into force in 1572, no one was punished in this way.

In 1578, the powers of justices of the peace to punish vagrants and to collect contributions (i.e., fines) were transferred to the magistrates. Under the Vagabonds Act, no one was punished in this way. In 1578, the powers of justices of the peace to punish vagrants and collect contributions (in essence, taxes) were transferred to church constables (Inwood, 2000).

Who deserved assistance was first decided arbitrarily by a curator (supervisier), and after the reform of 1723, by a 'workshop test' introduced by an act passed by Parliament on the initiative of Edward Knatchbull.

Only the 'deservingpoor' continued to receive material assistance, but due to a decline in property crimes (Sharpe, 1999), vagrants and unlicensed beggars were no longer preventively imprisoned. However, they were sent to a craft workshop, a manufactory or a 'workhouse'.

The amount of funds allocated to help people experiencing poverty was, in a sense, a function of donors' wealth and generosity, which depended mainly on the region's (county) level of economic development. There were, therefore, apparent local differences in the amount of donations in individual parishes, prompting people experiencing poverty to move in search of higher benefits.

The Settlement, Employment and Relief of the Poor Act of 1662 sought to curb this practice by defining criteria for settlement: owning or renting property valued above a certain amount, paying parish rates, completing a legal apprenticeship, serving for a year in a free state, or holding public office for a year. This law did not stop the migration of low-income people; from 1691 onwards, registration and stigmatisation (with special badges) of paupers entitled to public care were introduced.

This also failed, so the Poor Law Act of 1729 not only tightened the criteria for settlement, but also required that the costs of the beneficiary's relocation be covered by the parish from which they came; a special tax was introduced for this purpose in 1738-1739. The number of beneficiaries was to be further reduced by the 1744 Rogues, Vagabonds, and other Idle and Disorderly Persons Act. It concerned the placement of men in a house of correction who had abandoned their wives and children.

Anyone who apprehended such an irresponsible individual received a large reward (5 shillings). Unmarried women with children born out of wedlock were treated even worse. Based on the amendment to the poor law, from 1776 onwards, they were placed in homes built especially for mothers and the alleged fathers of bastards.

It was not until 1844 that the Poor Law Amendment Act abolished this treatment of 'fallen' women and authorised mothers of illegitimate children to apply for a maintenance order against the child's unmarried father.

5. Exploitation in ‘Workhouses’

Almost two centuries earlier, around 1557, the first workhouse was established in Bridewell, the former London residence of Henry VIII. It housed craft workshops of various specialities. Soon, about 200 such houses were operating in England. However, they did not fulfil their intended purpose: they were places of depravity rather than rehabilitation, and instead of generating income, they incurred losses.

From 1575, each parish had a warehouse of wool, hemp, flax and iron to supply such establishments. This rehabilitation policy effectively hampered wage growth and the development of the internal market. At the same time, overseas trade (supported by monarchs) flourished, laying the foundations for Britain's future maritime and colonial power. Learning from its own mistakes, England also drew on earlier Dutch and German experiences (Bogucka, 1986) and later French ones, which led to the creation of a network of economically rational forced-labour houses at the end of the 17th century.

The primary area of production in these houses was textiles, particularly wool spinning, for which there was high demand in foreign markets. The next step towards rationalising the costs of social care was the Poor Law Act of 1597, which defined maintenance obligations within families, introduced a mechanism for ‘indexing’ local taxes to a fund to support low-income individuals, and strengthened administrative control in this area.

Saving on the costs of expanding care facilities – what we would today call ‘social infrastructure’ – the church-affiliated shelters and hospitals that survived the Reformation were transferred to local administration on the initiative of Elizabeth I. From then on, parishes (communes) could merge in any way they wished to share shelters or commission third parties to care for people experiencing poverty.

These issues were regulated by the Act for Erecting Hospitals, or Abiding and Working Houses for the Poor, which came into force in the same year as the Elizabethan Poor Relief Act. Control over these institutions was entrusted to overseers (Overseers of the Poor). At the same time, the entire welfare system was supervised centrally by the Privy Council, to which justices submitted reports on their activities.

The Act also allowed for the establishment and construction of hospitals for charitable purposes, provided that sufficient funds were guaranteed to maintain these institutions for at least one year. The first publicly funded health clinic operated between 1697 and 1725 on the premises of the Royal College of Physicians on Warwick Lane, where people experiencing poverty received free consultations, medical assistance and medicines.

Elizabethan reforms, intended to alleviate the plight of people experiencing poverty, were thwarted by subsequent events, particularly the civil war and the restoration of

the profligate Stuarts to the British throne. Despite social reforms, at the end of the 17th century, statistically speaking, 63% of the English population had incomes below the poverty line (£40 per year), with permanent residents receiving support for the poor (cottagers and paupers) receiving only £6-10 (Mortimer, 2017). At that time, Great Britain entered the era of primitive accumulation of capital.

The exploitation of labour was a generally accepted and approved norm, so factory owners not only had no qualms about exploiting workers, but considered themselves benefactors. This is evidenced, among other things, by a memorandum from 1696: 'The poor can take their children off the streets and rescue them from idleness, putting them to work with wool and spindles, thanks to which a five-year-old child can earn four pence a day, while also having the opportunity, thanks to their early experience, to become a good worker later on' (Lipiński, 1968; Miciuła, 2017).

This state of affairs was considered natural not only by capitalists but also by some philosophers. Bernard Mandeville (1670-1773) in 'The Fable of the Bees', first published in 1705, argued that no great nation can be happy 'without a great multitude of working poor', and that all attempts to repair social relations are nothing more than a harmful utopia, because the disappearance of self-love or selfishness is equivalent to social stagnation and apathy.

Moreover, the 'search for virtues' yields no positive benefit and merely distracts attention from the vices that could be exploited. "Moral virtues are to politics what flattery is to pride (The moral virtues are the political offspring which flattery begot upon pride), paradoxically, private vices are a gain for the community" (Mandeville, 1957). Mandeville argues that even 'the most repulsive vices bring public good'. He gives the example of a libertine, a man full of vices, who nevertheless allows tailors, cooks, and other workers to exist and pays them for their services.

Thus, the libertine benefits society. The Fable of the Bees was not so much an apology for capitalist exploitation as a satire on England in 1705, when the Tories accused the Duke of Marlborough and the ministry, criticising both officials for their misguided (in their opinion) decision to wage war against Spain, and especially the lifestyle of the duke, who was swimming in all kinds of riches.

Like Adam Smith later, Mandeville was sure that it was the actions of individuals that brought about the public good. Smith, however, believed in virtuous self-interest, which gives rise to invisible cooperation. Mandeville believed that it is precisely on flaws that a good and effective economic system can be built.

He largely preceded Smith's laissez-faire, and was also the creator of the concept of the 'division of labour', to which Smith creatively referred in the first volume of his magnum opus: 'An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations': "The division of labour, from which so many benefits flow, was not originally the work of any human wisdom, foreseeing and aiming at the universal prosperity it

brings. It is a necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a particular propensity of human nature, which has no regard to so large a utility, namely, the propensity to exchange, to trade, and to exchange one thing for another" (Miciuła, 2018; Smith, 2003).

6. Adapting the Law of People with Low Incomes to the Challenges of the Industrial Revolution

Passed in 1601, the Poor Law Act – widely regarded as the cornerstone of the pan-European welfare system – did not introduce any significant regulatory changes to the previously established principles of caring for people experiencing poverty, but merely consolidated earlier laws.

Subsequent changes can hardly be called revolutionary, at least until the French Revolution swept the Bourbons from the throne and England lost its colonies in North America. All this resulted in high prices, the self-organisation of workers into trade unions, and the spread of new ideologies that threatened the existing legal order.

To prevent excessive pauperisation of society (which threatened social peace), a social minimum tied to the price of bread was introduced in 1795; the so-called Speenhamland system blurred the distinction between a worker's minimum wage and social benefits. Incidentally, on the European continent, this system of wage and benefit indexation was adopted by Prussia, among others, which (due to the fiscal inefficiency of local budgets) became one of several reasons for moving away from the supply model in favour of social insurance in the mid-19th century.

Although during the Enlightenment, people were no longer punished with death for vagrancy and the term 'outlaw' lost its original meaning, at the end of the 18th century, the state's attitude towards unlicensed beggars and community members who refused to work remained hostile. Captured vagrants were forcibly conscripted into the army or navy, which (due to the high probability of death) was considered a more severe punishment than staying in a 'workhouse'.

Contrary to Thomas Gilbert's intentions, the Relief of the Poor Act, passed in 1782, was also repressive. This act remained in force for ten years and made it easier to sentence insolvent debtors to prison, where conditions were tragic, even inhumane. Three years before its repeal, in 1790, following a scandal that shocked the public, justices of the peace were authorised to inspect and report on the conditions in prisons, 'workhouses' and almshouses, and, from 1792, they had the right to punish supervisors who neglected their duties.

The maintenance of quasi-rehabilitation facilities was a source of enormous financial abuse and, at the same time, imposed a severe burden on parish budgets, a problem remedied by the new Poor Law Act of 1795. After it entered into force, poor law guardians – with the consent of a justice of the peace – could select individuals for

benefits without 'imposing a workhouse test', i.e., they had the right to provide support in the beneficiary's home.

The Outdoor Labour Test Order and the Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order regulated these issues. They lost their legal force after the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act came into force. With this Act, which considerably tightened the criteria for entitlement to benefits, the British middle class hoped to reduce the burden of the poor rate tax.

From then on, all financial assistance was considered a loan (debtors who failed to repay even a small amount on time were sent to prison). Benefits were available only to individuals who were utterly unable to work, provided that they resided in workhouses. Commenting on these regulations, Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) sarcastically stated: 'In England, poverty is a crime' (Rathbone, 1869).

It was no coincidence that the drastic reduction in the poor's entitlement to benefits came at a time when England was nearing the end of the first industrial revolution and entering the age of 'steam and electricity'. Vagrants and beggars no longer threatened the British ruling classes, but by the growing strength of the proletariat and the trade union movement, as well as new doctrines: Luddism, Chartism and communism.

Organisations bringing together workers of the same profession already existed in England in the 18th century. By the mid-19th century, there were around 1,600, but they lacked the power to make an impact. The situation changed in favour of the proletariat after the first large trade union was established in London in 1824 (against the ban), followed in 1834 (on the initiative of Robert Owen) – the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, and in 1845 – The National Association of United Trades for the Protection of Labour.

In 1868, a national trade union centre, the Trades Union Congress, was established. Some leaders of the trade union movement believed that improving workers' lives required entering the political arena, which led to the transformation of the central unions into political parties (including the Independent Labour Party, the Fabian Society, and the Social Democratic Federation).

The Representation of the People Act of 1884 enabled members of these parties to run for parliamentary seats (Davies, 1966). In February 1900, the Independent Labour Party, the Fabian Society, and the Social Democratic Federation merged to form a centre-left, social-democratic political party, which, until 1906, was known as the Labour Representation Committee.

At that time, Great Britain was the most economically developed power, and the prospects for relatively lasting social peace were supported by laws that gradually improved the safety of work and the economic conditions of workers. Protection against the risk of poverty was also provided by civil liability and accident insurance, which were becoming increasingly popular with employers and employees and were

implemented on commercial terms. At the same time, everyone had to assume the risk of old age or disability by purchasing a policy from a commercial insurance company in advance.

7. Summary

The circumstances in which the tradition of welfare law originated make it restrictive, stigmatise beneficiaries, make them dependent on benefits, and thus often perpetuate poverty. This model, which until recently was commonly used to protect against the risk of family income poverty, has evolved since the 1960s, consistently moving toward the deinstitutionalisation of social assistance (Rakusa-Suszczewski, 2023).

As a result, in modern times, the law of people with low incomes has lost its original meaning. Currently, it is a term used in legal language to refer to guarantees (by the state) of benefits that enable access to legal aid for people experiencing poverty. The need to provide these benefits stems from international obligations, including the obligation to guarantee the right to a court, resulting from Article 6(3)(c) of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, confirmed in Article 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

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