

What happened to Charity?

John Hyde

For many of my friends, Christmas is an important Christian festival; for others, the day when we celebrate friends and family. For both it is a joyous occasion at which those who have family ties strengthen them. Pity the soul who cannot play with children and enjoy the company of kin at Christmas.

Christmas was once also the season for charity and some Christian churches still try to keep it that way. The church once taught us to give a tenth of our substance to good works and some people really did it. But charity has changed with the coming of the Welfare State.

Among family and friends we still mark Christmas by exchanging gifts, so much so that small fortunes are spent buying things the recipients don't much want. But as we sing of Good King Wenceslas, we think of the thousands we have already paid to Good King Bob, and put only a token gift in the plate.

On the face of things our Christmas giving is not very efficient. Many of our gifts languish unread, unworn, unused or unplayed with. Why don't we give our loved ones cash to buy the things they really want?

We don't normally give cash because the recipient's wants are not normally very pressing, and he or she normally wants a symbol of our affection. And Money is too easy---it is far too efficient. Many things beside wealth motivate us, such as receiving the respect of those whose opinions we value. When we exchange Christmas gifts, the underlying gift is respect and, when one is wealthy, effort devoted to finding a present is often a better measure of it than cash.

Meanwhile, something has gone terribly wrong with care for the needy outside our immediate circles. Voluntary charity is a small part of our budgets. Our taxes have been unable to prevent people dying of neglect, or thousands of kids not having family Christmases because they do not have effective families. The proportion of the population registered with the government as "needy" is higher than at any time since the great depression. Christmas is also the season of suicides.

One reason welfare fails is that most of the money the government handles is taxed from the middle class and paid to the middle class---it does not get to the poor. We call this

practice "churning". Another is the practice of "feeding the sparrows through horses". An instance of this is the thousands of trained, well-paid, unionised social workers who flutter around the poor. When children suffer neglect nowadays, they are surrounded by social workers who are less effective than the unpaid relatives and other interested people who would have insisted that their "charity" was exchanged for some effort on the part of the recipient---effort that would have earned good standing in the eyes of others.

"Churning" and "feeding the horses" cannot account for the trebling and more of unemployed youth, single parents, sickness beneficiaries and old age pensioners. The proportion of people living beyond 65 has increased but much more important is the fact that more of the elderly now claim the pension. And there are many more single parents, officially sick and officially poor than in the nineteen sixties.

The Centre for Independent Studies, with its usual attention to the relevant, brought Charles Murray from the United States to lecture in Australia. Murray has made a particular study of the nineteen sixties' (Kennedy and Johnson) programmes to end poverty in the US.

Poverty, measured by the official poverty line, fell steadily and considerably during the fifties and sixties but by 1968, when Nixon came to power, it had stopped falling and by 1980 was rising sharply. Expenditure, adjusted for inflation, rose sharply during the Nixon years and did not peak until 1977. The "War on Poverty" programme accompanied the growth of poverty.

Data relating to employment, crime, single parenthood and educational achievement are even more damning for the relevant programs.

While in Australia Charles Murray said, "The new policies changed the rules of the game for poor people. The effect of the new policies was to make it profitable for the poor to behave in the short term in ways that were destructive in the long term. We made it economically possible to have a baby without a father, possible to get a high school diploma without studying, possible to get along without a job, possible to commit crimes with no immediate consequences. In the long term, all these behaviours still had disastrous consequences---that did not change. But we masked those long-term consequences by softening the short-term consequences and thereby subsidising irretrievable mistakes."

We should not be surprised that by subsidising poverty we get more of it. If people are paid not to achieve, then of course they are less likely to do so. Why then do we not have the same deleterious effects on our children (and other loved ones) when we give them presents? The short answer is that sometimes we do. Who does not know a "spoilt" child?

However, most of us recognise the danger. We counter it by rewarding effort and moral behaviour with our respect. Our children and our friends are expected to behave well and we make our expectations very plain to them. Unnecessary free-riding is frowned upon.

The Kennedy/Johnson programs, and in Australia the Whitlam programs, and the tenor of the times, homogenised the poor. Moral judgments were out, there was no distinction between the deserving and the undeserving. The battling poor, the girls and boys who did not sleep around, and those who struggled to give a little of themselves were not only stripped of material rewards once associated with "good" behaviour but they were also denied recognition, respect and the status of decent person. The deserving poor were thus stripped of pride and left with nothing to aspire to.

We may wish that it were otherwise, but largesse that puts the receiver under no obligation whatsoever spoils adults as well as children.

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