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## Dignified Work Requires It To Be Useful

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Should public policy focus more on the dignity of work? An increasing number of intellectuals and policy experts think so.

American conservative scholar Oren Cass has written that “a labour market in which workers can support strong families and communities is the central determinant of long-term prosperity”. Rob Halfon, the Conservative MP for Harlow, has called for the Tories to rebrand as “The Workers’ Party”, championing their National Living Wage and commitment to workers’ rights.

The Labour Party and Democrats in the US take up the mantle by pushing for stronger unions, more employment legislation and even higher statutory wage floors.

Zero-hours contracts and low pay are front-line gripes of Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell.

All these views are underpinned by the correct belief that work is an important component of human well-being and flourishing.

Yet notice a pattern. Policymakers prioritise enhancing either dignity at work (working conditions and treatment) or the dignity that comes from the returns of work (earning income to provide for your family).

In doing so, they miss something important: that the dignity of work comes in large part from the activity being genuinely useful or valuable too.

Being treated with respect and having the means to provide a decent standard of living are important. But feeling self-worth also necessitates your endeavours being in demand or thought socially productive.

That’s one thing that makes so many suggestions for how to strengthen labour markets misguided.

The American Left is infatuated with the idea of the government funding well-paid roles for anyone that desires a job in infrastructure provision, environmental activities or caregiving.

They call it a “jobs guarantee”. Yet make-work schemes funded by taxpayers are never going to induce the same dignity as putting your labour to the service of others’ real demands. Indeed, the very term “guarantee” grants rights without obligations.

There is nothing inherently dignified about work that only exists because of government protectionism or favouritism either.

Donald Trump and some American conservatives seem obsessed with preserving certain forms of employment in aspic, not least in heavy industries, such as steel production, and manufacturing.

But keeping alive inefficient sectors cannot guarantee long-term dignity. How dignified did the UK miners feel when the Thatcher government liberalised the energy sector? Economies change over time and attempts to romanticise these industries are ahistorical: children of the workers often longed to escape to work in the newer, safer sectors of the future.

Policies designed to help workers by improving conditions or pay rates can likewise beget problems.

Higher minimum wages and new labour market regulations can make it more difficult for certain demographic groups (particularly the young and unskilled) to find productive employment in the first place.

Firms also adjust to increases in their costs. Most surveys find the majority of workers on zero-hours contracts are happy with their flexibility.

But recent research by economists Nikhil Datta, Giulia Giupponi and Stephen Machin suggests that undesired zero-hours contracts may have become more prevalent because of minimum wage hikes.

In the social care sector, they estimate the introduction of the National Living Wage increased the probability of a domiciliary worker being on a zero-hours contract by 4.3pc.

This is not to glamorise all work in the private economy on the basis that it's "in demand."

In an ideal world, we would all enjoy highly remunerative jobs that provided so much fulfilment it barely felt like work at all. We are a long way off that goal.

The reality is many workers do arduous tasks for low pay. Someone cleaning bed pans in a social care home on a zero-hours contract, earning minimum wage and still struggling to feed his children, is unlikely to feel self-respect or be comforted by the acknowledgement that his work is useful because there is a need for it.

Yet in devising policy, it would be foolish for policymakers to ignore the clear signals markets provide on what activities society values and how this shapes workers' feelings of self-worth.

Here, we are starting from a good place. Though one wouldn't think it given the nature of the debate, the UK is experiencing a jobs boom, with the unemployment rate at just 4pc – driven by job creation in the private sector.

Far from celebration, many seem determined to write off that achievement, dismissing it as a story of proliferating low-paid, part-time, insecure work.

A snootiness among the chattering classes has come to prominence about certain work activity, particularly self-employment in the platform economy.

Left-wing commentators seem keen to downplay the importance of work as a route out of poverty too, even though the evidence clearly shows that greater attachment to the labour market hugely reduces the likelihood of facing hardship.

These developments are regrettable, as is the Left's about-turn against wage subsidies or tax credits – probably the least-damaging short-term way of boosting poorer worker income without harming job opportunities or picking winners.

With huge, expected structural changes around the corner in relation to automation of job activities, the disconnect between the contemporary health of the labour market and concerns about it have arguably never been greater.

Huge challenges do face us in terms of delivering higher living standards through raising growth rates, or ensuring opportunities are realised as technologies evolve. But if policymakers genuinely care for dignity in work, they must acknowledge humans aspire to be needed in this brave new world. Working conditions and good incomes are important, but labour market policies focused on those goals alone can be patronising, short-termist and risky.

Markets provide messages about what activities society currently values.

Policymakers should largely see these as a guide map to one part of delivering dignity in work, not a problem their interventions can overcome.

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