

Framing and Shaming: The 2017 Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All Campaign

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The repeated circulation of anti-welfare discourses has served to encourage limited and often incorrect public understandings of issues pertaining to welfare. Central to these processes is the social construction of notions of ‘deservedness’ and ‘undeservedness.’ In this article we examine the 2017 ‘Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All’ (original emphasis) campaign initiated by the Department of Social Protection in the Republic of Ireland. We present our analysis of the dominant discourses evident in the campaign itself and the in-house discussions in the lead up to the campaign. Our article shows that this Irish campaign rehearses a familiar international discourse which follows distinct patterns or rules, and we evidence, in keeping with other moral panics, the spurious nature of the data being used to exaggerate the scale and extent of welfare ‘fraud’.

Keywords: Welfare, welfare cheats, ‘Undeserving Poor’, neoliberalism, gesture politics.

Introduction

An emerging body of scholarship has begun to interrogate how the state rehearses, amplifies and circulates anti-welfare discourses. One potentially fruitful avenue of inquiry is to scrutinise official state documents on welfare fraud and the make-up of state-led anti-fraud campaigns. In Ireland, for example, Gaffney and Millar (2020) examined two anti-welfare fraud strategy documents from 2011 and 2014. They evidence how social welfare fraud is framed as a form of rational action by fraudsters. They also note the growing emphasis on both surveillance and workfare. Devereux and Power’s (2019) examination of the 2017 ‘Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All’ (original emphasis) (WCCUA) campaign by the Department of Social Protection (DSP) analysed how the Irish media initially disseminated a highly uncritical account of the WCCUA’s assertions concerning ‘welfare fraud.’ They also evidenced how two counter-hegemonic campaigns emerged which challenged the state’s assumptions about what constituted welfare fraud and the actual extent of such activities. This article proposes a further avenue of inquiry. Rather than focusing on how

the WCCUA campaign played out in both media and public discourse, we go behind the scenes to examine the shaping of the campaign. Central to our reconstruction is an analysis of a set of internal and external emails, memos, and planning documents.¹ Mindful of Hall's (1991 [1973]) classic study on Encoding and Decoding, we focus on the use of dominant and professional codes in the promotional materials used. This illuminates not only the choices made in constructing the campaign, but also reveals the thinking behind the use of certain anti-welfare discourses – practices many of which have a long history. Our close critical reading of the language/discourses used by public servants, consultants, media agencies and politicians allows for a deeper understanding of how hegemonic assumptions concerning welfare fraud are first encoded prior to public circulation. Our interpretative gaze is also cognisant of the fact that this particular campaign took place within a specific context – namely, the then Minister for Social Protection's (Leo Varadkar) electoral ambitions to become leader of the Centre Right Fine Gael party.

We begin by situating our work in the context of recent debates concerning welfare and welfare fraud. Central to these processes are discourses concerning 'deservedness' and 'undeservedness', and the demonisation of welfare recipients. The background to the WCCUA campaign is outlined as a summary of the methodological approach. In presenting our key findings we focus on the dominant discourses evident in (a) the in-house discussions in the lead up to the campaign and (b) in the campaign materials.

Normalising anti-welfarism

Ireland is seen by many as a hybrid welfare state (NESC, 2005), characterised by minimal state involvement (until the onset of the Covid Pandemic), the promotion of market solutions and the cultivation of an ideology of personal responsibility in order to individualise risk (Turner and Haynes, 2006: 88-89), which has resulted in the emergence of a form of Neoliberal corporatism emblematically positioned much closer to Boston than Berlin (Boucher and Collins, 2003: 295; see also Murphy and Dukelow, 2016 and McCashin, 2019 for an overview of the Irish Welfare State). Moreover, Boland and Griffin (2015), Gaffney and Millar (2020), and Whelan (2021) amongst others, have documented ever increasing conditionalities and a 'workfarist' mentality within the Irish welfare system.

Hills (2014) argues that Neoliberal governments around the globe have deliberately constricted peoples' understanding of what 'welfare' and 'the welfare state' means, with the dominant discourse enabling a re-imagining of the welfare state 'as an unaffordable system of cash benefits doled out to 'economically inactive' people', rather than as the provision of services on which most citizens depend (cited in Tyler, 2020: 191; see also Slater, 2014). In that context it is useful to remind ourselves that Pinker (1970) argued that stigma is utilised by administrations to distribute (or restrict access to) limited resources. Tyler (2020: 189) goes further by arguing that stigma has 'always played a pivotal role in the rationing of welfare, and in winning consent for periodic attacks on social provision'.² Following Lens (2002) and Edelman (1998), we hold that our every-day understanding of welfare is communicated to us through language which constructs 'myths' and promotes the dominant neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility (Lens, 2002: 137-8). These myths in turn legitimise the desire of the state to change the attitudes and behaviours of the socially excluded (Edelman, 1998: 134) and are communicated to us via key words which

serve as cognitive prompts, framing the issues and functioning as linguistic references which enable the public to fortify existing beliefs about the causes of poverty/social exclusion and those who are afflicted by it (Edelman, 1998, cited in Lens, 2002: 144). Through such discursive processes 'social relations of power and identity, including ones explicitly or implicitly problematizing particular groups are negotiated, affirmed and reproduced' (Morrisson, 2019: 261-2).

Researchers like van Oorschot (2006) demonstrate how 'deservingness' is central to understanding public attitudes and beliefs about welfare provision in Europe, with such demarcation arguably becoming more acute in the current neoliberal era (see, for example, Jørgensen and Thomsen (2016) for a discussion of welfare chauvinism in Denmark). Yet for such constructed categorisations to succeed they must be believable, and that requires them to be identifiable. Additionally, to rally 'the full weight of public opprobrium' against those caricatures that the myth has created, the threat that they pose also needs to be amplified (Morrisson, 2019: 255). Such framing processes are evidenced in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark and the USA to name but a few countries, with political rhetoric about 'the welfare scrounger/skiver' and campaigns to address welfare fraud intensifying over the past decade (see, for example, Connor, 2007; Katz, 2013 [1989]; Jensen, 2014; Wilcock, 2014, 2019; Scott and Masselot, 2018; Hansen, 2019; Headworth, 2021).

Forty years on from Golding and Middleton's (1982) seminal piece on the role that the media and public attitudes to poverty played in the implementation of the neoliberal agenda, the evidence suggests that beliefs about the existence of and '(aversion to) a sub class of (anti-) citizens who refuse to 'play by the rules'' of our global 'economic system remains deeply ingrained' in the psyche of wider society (Morrisson, 2019: 213). Indeed, Seabrook (2016: 2) speaks of how:

... a minoritised poor – welfare cheats, scroungers, skivers, parasites, free-loaders, beggars – attract a lexicon of abuse in rich societies, in which majorities, no longer insecure, can congratulate themselves on their own (often less than merited) prosperity, while expressing their loathing for those unable, for whatever reason, to avail themselves of the abundance which developed societies have placed, at least in theory, within the reach of everyone.

The now dominant discourse of 'scroungers' and 'shirkers' should therefore be understood as the 'product of a nexus of neoliberalism' and 'the language and imagery used to demonize, other, mark and inscribe' those who rely on the welfare state for their survival as very effective 'neoliberal constructs' (Morrisson, 2019: 259).

In Ireland, the wider context is one in which the government's response to the 2008 global financial crash was to pursue labour market activation, welfare conditionality and austerity policies more vigorously than at any other time in Ireland's welfare history (see Whelan, 2021: 10-1), and to distract from what really caused our economic collapse by scapegoating certain groups (see O'Flynn *et al.*, 2014; see also Marron, 2021 for a discussion of how the media did likewise). The state acquired massive debts by 'socialising' the liabilities of private banks; the total cost being put at approximately '€35 billion or 22 per cent of Ireland's nominal GDP in 2011' (Whelan, 2012). In addition, between 2007/08 and 2011 €20bn (12 per cent of GDP) was taken out of the economy in austerity budgets, producing massive social consequences. Against this backdrop Government Ministers began to talk of unemployment being a 'lifestyle choice' with increasing regularity. For example, the then Social Protection Minister and Labour Party Leader,

Joan Burton, stated people ‘come into the (social protection) system straight after school as a lifestyle choice. This is not acceptable, everyone should be expected to contribute and work’ (cited in Taft, 2013; see also McConnell *et al.*, 2011). Other rationalisations focussed on women’s ‘immorality’ and/or ‘imprudence’ as evidenced by Fine Gael TD³ Derek Keating, who spoke of young women who find themselves caring for multiple children by multiple fathers with the consequences falling on the state/taxpayer (cited in Browne, 2012). In line with the assertions offered previously by Joan Burton, these young women were said to be creating ‘a new lifestyle of welfare economy’, despite the number of single-parent claimants dropping from 92,326 in 2010 to 87,735 in 2012 (Browne, 2012). This discursive strategy has a long history internationally (see, for example, Skeggs, 2006; Tyler, 2013; Wilcock, 2014).

There was also a major focus on welfare ‘fraud’, with many in the political establishment and the media proffering anecdotes/myths over facts on the subject. Irish people are routinely exposed to television investigations by leading state and commercial stations (see, for example, discussion of *Paul Connolly Investigates* in Devereux and Power, 2019), print media coverage, and vocal pronouncements from establishment politicians claiming that massive fraud is occurring. A decade ago, then Minister of State, Fergus O’Dowd, for example claimed that approximately €600m annually⁴ was the cost of welfare fraud in the state (see Taft, 2011). Yet this €600 million figure was a ‘control saving’, which means that ‘if there were no controls or inspections’, there would be a *guesstimated* ‘€600 million in over-payments over time, but crucially fraud would only account for a minority of these over-payments’. Fraud was actually €26 million in 2010, a figure which accounted for approximately 0.1 per cent of the Department of Social Protections’ budget at that time (Taft, 2011). Thus, we agree with Taft’s contention that ‘to talk of €600 million in fraud is highly fraudulent’. Discursive normalisation of (anti)welfare therefore has a long history underpinning it, and the WCCUA campaign, was no exception in this regard.

Methods

Building on our earlier work (see Devereux and Power, 2019) which focused on media coverage of the 2017 WCCUA campaign and the emergence of a counter-hegemonic discourse in online and other settings, this article offers a detailed analysis of internal DSP documents, campaign materials, pre-planning memos and email exchanges.

To unpack the internal dynamics of the DSP in the lead up to the WCCUA campaign we started by familiarising ourselves with previous press releases on social welfare fraud issued by the Department and its predecessor in the period 2007-17. We also read the Anti-Fraud Strategy documents issued by DSP in 2011 and 2014. Our main task was to analyse the emails, memos and campaign planning documents sourced from the DSP under the *Freedom of Information Act* (FOI) (see Sheridan, 2017). These were subjected to a close critical reading (see Walby and Larsen, 2012 for a discussion on the use of FOI requests as data). Our semantic reading of the emails and memos revealed an interesting internal debate concerning the contours of the planned campaign in terms of its overall strategy and the language to be used. The email exchanges offer us an insight into the rationale for the campaign within the department. While newspapers have been described as containing the ‘first draft of history’, an analysis of email has the potential to shine a light on internal debates and discussions. Notwithstanding concerns individual public servants might have about FOI requests, the corpus of emails we examined evidence an open

exchange of ideas. Some of the emails requested under the FOI were redacted owing to concerns about commercial sensitivities.

We also scrutinised the campaign's press release and its associated advertising content. We systematically analysed both the language used (descriptors) in all of the texts and the visual imagery employed in the actual campaign to signify and explain social welfare fraud. All the campaign materials (posters, newspaper adverts, radio 'game-show') were analysed discursively. We also paid close attention to how printed campaign materials worked semiotically.

The WCCUA campaign

Background

In the lead up to the election of a new leader for the governing Centre-Right Fine Gael party (June 2017), one of the two contenders – Leo Varadkar – instigated a highly publicised anti-welfare fraud campaign in his capacity as Minister for Social Protection. The WCCUA campaign cost €200,845 and ran from April to July. Mr. Varadkar somewhat controversially claimed, in his wider election bid, to represent 'the people who get up early in the morning.' His use of this carefully chosen phrase, with its intimations of 'deservedness'/'undeservedness', in his leadership campaign was revealing in that it was not only a coded message to his supporters within the Fine Gael party; it also served to identify (and other) those members of Irish society that he, and thus by extension Fine Gael, do *not* represent. As Devereux and Power (2019) evidence, the WCCUA campaign received high levels of media coverage and there was, initially at least, a replication of the campaign's spurious assertions concerning the scale of social welfare fraud. The Creed Agency who created the campaign⁵ for the DSP argued:

People who cheat the Welfare literally cheat us all. But for some reason, it's seen as a victimless crime. Socially acceptable and widely abused. Our campaign aimed to raise the debate and start a conversation about welfare fraud. Reports of welfare cheats doubled in the first week, social media went into meltdown and all main publications and news outlets spread the word. The campaign was a huge success and got people debating the rights and wrongs of cheating the welfare (see www.thecreed.ie).

The campaign singled out three specific categories of welfare recipient – namely, those on Jobseeker Schemes, Supplementary Welfare Allowance, and One Parent Family Allowance Payments – as being the subject of the majority of complaints alleging welfare fraud.⁶ There was a concerted effort to encourage citizens to engage in surveillance of those deemed to be fraudulent. An email (23/3/2017) summarised the aims of the campaign as being to: (1) increase fraud reporting; (2) change public perceptions about fraud; and (3) evidence how the DSP responds to fraud thus reducing/deterring fraud.

Key findings

Cheaters or fraudsters?

Commencing in September 2016, the emails, predictably, focused on the tendering process; its key media components; their production and budgetary constraints. However,

they also reveal that the language and overall message of the campaign were the subject of detailed discussion and debate.⁷ Mr. Varadkar took an active role in shaping the campaign and its timing. On December 6, 2016, for example, an email stated:

Leo's thoughts on this are that he likes the [redacted] one. However, he feels we need to emphasise more that this is just not money from your pocket; that someone else will lose out directly. We want to reduce fraud so we can preserve resources for those who need them most. Could that be worked in somehow?

Terms 'fraud hotline campaign'; 'anti-fraud campaign' and 'fraud awareness campaign' were initially used. Sensitivities arose concerning the planned use of the terms 'fraud' and 'crime' owing to what was perceived as public disquiet with reported scandals involving the Gardai (Irish police service). The most revealing exchange amongst the department's officials focused on whether the media campaign might be better served by using the term 'cheats' instead of 'fraud'. A memo from the agency running the campaign (April 11, 2017) was circulated which stated:

Fraud means "wrongful or criminal deception intended to result in financial or personal gain". It's mainly associated with businesses, corporates, businessmen and rich people who have committed fraud on a grand scale. It does work as a headline but it's not as powerful as using 'cheat'. Cheat, means "to act dishonestly or unfairly in order to gain an advantage". It's far more colloquial and it's how people really speak to each other. People don't say 'Marie committed Welfare fraud', they say 'she cheated the Welfare'. Cheating is also a far more emotional and hence more powerful word to be used in advertising. No one likes a cheat but some may think fraud is almost acceptable. If we really want to strike a chord with people, using 'cheat' will have greater impact and hence be more effective.

The decision to use the word 'cheat' is of great significance. Such a choice was arguably underpinned by a knowledge of the communicative power of the chosen word versus its competitor. Furthermore, we would argue that the information about the scale of actual 'fraud' was available to the planners at the time they decided to launch the campaign.

Welfare rights and welfare wrongs

The WCCUA campaign was run across all media platforms with content being disseminated on billboards, bus shelters, digital and social media and radio. The DSP press release issued on April 17th and the copy used in the subsequent advertising campaign foregrounded the word 'cheat' in its headline – 'Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All' – yet it is noteworthy that the term 'fraud' occurs ten times in the main body of the press release as opposed to just four uses of the word 'cheat/s/ing.' The phrase 'hard-hitting' is used three times and the document claims that the department's antifraud and control measures resulted in savings of over €500 million in 2016.⁸ It is also revealing that the press release puts fraud ahead of control measures which have resulted in savings for the taxpayer ('Anti-fraud and control measures in 2016 saved over €500 million in expenditure'), thus implying that the extent of fraud is higher than it actually is. It states that 20,800 reports alleging fraud were reported in 2016. Of these, 300 cases were referred to the State

Solicitor's office in order to commence legal proceedings and an additional 160 cases were referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions. It further claims that 'one in three' reports of welfare fraud in 2016 resulted in payments 'being reduced or stopped'. The press release singles out specific groups for mention regarding welfare fraud, listing those in receipt of Jobseekers payments, Supplementary Welfare Allowance and One Parent Family Payments in particular. Devereux and Power's (2019) examination of media coverage of the campaign evidences how the language used in the press release was replicated by reporters and is an example of how the state effectively shaped the subsequent media discourse. The two thirty second radio ads were modelled on the familiar format of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*⁹ and featured a quiz called *Social Welfare Rights And Wrongs* with the average man or woman in the street. The respondents ('Martin' and 'Orla') give 'incorrect' answers and are reminded of the 'correct' answer by the quizmaster. The 'audience' (signifying 'us' the public) is heard to chant 'Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All!' in unison. Five posters accompanied the campaign. They mimic the format of a simple tick-box survey. Readers are asked to tick 'Yes' or 'No' in response to questions such as 'Would You Report A Welfare Cheat?', 'Is It Right To Employ Someone Cash In Hand?' or 'Is It OK To Still Claim Illness Benefit Once You Have Recovered?'. The simple poster design used white text on a vivid red background. Red, of course, is routinely read as signifying danger. Mr. Varadkar was photographed at the launch with a large cardboard poster proclaiming, 'Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All', a photograph widely used in the subsequent media coverage.

Outcomes

If one of the intended outcomes of this campaign was to increase the level of welfare fraud reporting by ordinary members of the public, it can be said to have failed. A total of 7,718 allegations of suspected fraud were received by the DSP during the campaign (April to July). The total figure for 2017 was 21,000 (up just 200 on 2016). Of the 7,129 reports where people were identified, 2,071 (29 per cent) reports did not contain relevant information, or the information was insufficient to conduct a review. Of the remaining 5,058 cases, 218 were allegations against employers. Some 4,840 (67 per cent) cases were examined and matched to individuals with social welfare payments. Of these, 738 (10.3 per cent) claim reviews and/or investigations were initiated. These figures however need to be set in context. In 2017, the DSP total budget was €19.5 billion and the Department made weekly payments to 1.3 million people (in a total population of 5.5 million). For its part, the DSP undertook 750,000 control reviews in 2017. It is also noteworthy that by the end of 2017 it was finally conceded by the DSP that the framing of the campaign was problematic. At the Public Accounts Committee, the Department's head admitted:

'Putting the word cheat beside the word welfare ... I think we've learned from that. In retrospect I believe it was a mistake.' He added: 'You take the best advice from professional advisors in advertising and marketing and communications companies. You take their advice and you run with it' (McKeon, 2017). (Emphasis added).

Crucially, he also revealed that in 2016 '... most of the €110 million in overpayments [...] related to errors made by the Department's customers rather than deliberate fraud' (McKeon, 2017).

Conclusions

As evidenced in this article, in Ireland the miscalculated approximations of welfare fraud, recited by the propagators of the WCCUA campaign, were historically embedded in political contexts and constructed to further ideological and political goals.

The value of looking at the ‘shaping of the campaign’, as we have done in this article, is it demonstrates the problematic nature of ‘consultocracy’. By combining the words cheat and welfare, anti-fraud campaigns produce narratives that affect public understandings of the functionality, effectiveness and need for welfare programmes. Instead of encouraging empathy, generosity and universal well-being, by purposively omitting individual circumstances and the hardships people endure, those engaged in such campaigns not only demonise vulnerable members of our society (Lundström, 2013; Wilcock, 2014; Headworth, 2021), but also redirect the public’s attention from the structural causes of poverty, effectively undermining the value of welfare programmes. In line with Wilcock (2014), our study shows that anti-fraud campaigns not only limit the issue of fraud to the market and individual ethics of welfare recipients, they also discourage any questioning of the state’s continued need for surveillance of the ‘suspects’.

A belief that the strict control of clients acts as an anti-fraud measure has been embedded in the organisational culture of welfare institutions globally. As Ryan (2017) revealed in her research with welfare staff in Ireland, the rhetoric around welfare fraud is so deeply ingrained into decision-makers’ everyday interactions with clients, that a proportion of them become overly vigilant and investigate ‘suspects’ even when this is not part of their job description. Such sentiments among decision-makers in welfare institutions are particularly problematic in the context of discretionary decision-making where welfare staff have the liberty to act in line with what they perceive is fair. In such contexts, individual perceptions as opposed to state regulation may determine a person’s ability to access welfare support (Ryan, 2017; Ryan and Power, 2020) and initiatives such as the ‘welfare cheats’ campaign further ‘legitimises’ control, surveillance and suspicion of welfare recipients as potential fraudsters.

We argue that the ambitions behind the 2017 WCCUA campaign cannot be divorced from the wider context of Mr Varadkar’s aim of becoming leader of the Fine Gael party. The timing and language, we argue, sent a particular signal to his prospective electorate in Fine Gael that he was going to work for ‘those who get up early in the morning’ and crack down on those who were undeserving of assistance. Our findings show that discourses circulated via the campaign were not based upon empirical evidence, instead relying on recurring patterns of language and well-versed mythologies to shape public perceptions. Thus, as evidenced in this article, we assert that the anti-fraud campaigns are not just about saving taxpayers’ money, such discursive constructions which frame welfare recipients as being ‘intent on defrauding the system and parasitising the social body’ (Headworth, 2021: 27) ultimately bring the legitimacy of all welfare recipients into question and such gesture politics is hugely problematic.

Notes

1. The emails and memos (which amount to 465 pages) were disclosed to the journalist and academic Ken Foxe for the *Right To Know* organisation under the *Freedom of Information Act* (Foxe, 2017a, 2017b).

Freedom of information (FOI) requests are increasingly used in a range of social science disciplines to explore government activities and processes (see Savage and Hyde, 2014 and Walby and Luscombe, 2017).

2. We acknowledge that stigmatisation of the poor existed long before Neoliberalism (see Tyler, 2020; Whelan, 2021: 6-10; for a summary of the origins of such discourses).
3. Teachta Dála (TD) is a member of Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Irish Parliament.
4. This €600 million figure was an assertion which was uncritically repeated in the print and broadcast media and by many other commentators and has been repeated ad nauseum over the intervening years.
5. Scholars have noted that ‘consultocracy’ (reliance on consultants in government and public sector institutions) is now an endemic feature of neoliberal policy making (see, for example, Ylönen and Kuusela, 2019).
6. For a detailed account of each of these schemes see www.welfare.ie
7. A variety of personnel were involved in these exchanges including the Head of Communications Unit, Department of Social Protection and the Principle Officer, Control Policy, Debt Management and Prosecutions.
8. The DSP’s own figures show that for 2016, 16,225 social welfare overpayments were deemed to be fraudulent. This amounts to a total of €41 Million – or .2 per cent of the total DSP spend of €20 Billion. The majority of cases reviewed were deemed to be ‘minor.’ Four people received prison sentences in 2016 for welfare fraud and seventeen others were given suspended sentences. See Gallagher, 2017.
9. Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? is a UK (but internationally franchised) TV game show where contestants answer a series of multiple-choice questions to win a cash prize of up to £1 Million.

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