

'Told with great empathy. This might be the most important book you read this year'
JONATHAN FREEDLAND

A

RADICAL HELP

How We Can Remake the

**Relationships Between Us
and Revolutionise**

the Welfare State

HILARY COTTAM

Opening

Stan lives in Westminster, in the heart of London. With the window open you can hear the traffic on the street below, and from Stan's small flat it's only a short walk to the Palace of Westminster, the seat of government and decision-making. But for Stan, being close to government, theatres, cafés and busy streets means little. Stan sits alone, day after day, his long frame folded into the faded green corduroy of a friendly old chair.

At Stan's side a walking stick and an Arsenal scarf hang from a shelf of family pictures: a fair-haired grandson, his own parents and siblings stiffly arranged like eminent Victorians, and photos of Stan and his chums in the Navy. When I visit Stan he uses his stick to point at these things, and he tells me stories of Corsica, Rome and Asia; his days in the landing squad and his Saturdays on the terraces at Highbury.

Stan is a proud man. He knows what he likes, and what would bring him a little happiness. He wants to hear again the music he loves, in the company of others. It's a simple wish and it gave me an idea.

Our welfare services usually start like this – with an idea, but one that is born not in Stan's flat, but down the road in a government office. Public servants or consultants respond to a perceived need, perhaps the findings of a focus group or

a ministerial pledge, and they decide that a new service or a reform must be organised. Reports and budgets will be put together following a logic that looks good on paper and, at some uncertain time in the future and with much fanfare, the new programme will be launched. Much better still if there is a building to be opened and a ribbon to be cut: evidence of action. The result is nearly always an expensive failure. The elegantly conceived idea meets a more complex, messy reality, and much too late, after much too much investment, the flaws in the plan are revealed.

I start instead with what is already to hand. Stan can use the phone. It hardly ever rings, but he has a phone within arm's reach. Why could Stan not 'meet up' on the phone, with others who share his love of music? I've met a lot of people like Stan and many of them like the same music, so I asked Sean, the manager of the sheltered flats where Stan lives, if he could run a music group. Sean was enthusiastic. Tuesday night would be music night. It was fairly rudimentary: Sean dialled up a number of residents and played the music down the phone.

Strangers in the night . . . dah dah dah deeh dah . . . strangers in the night . . . the voice of Sinatra crackled over Stan's phone as he hummed along, his hand raised, involuntarily conducting the music. And then a chorus of voices broke in: 'Happy Birthday Stan!' It was Stan's ninetieth birthday and six people were on the line, enjoying the music and wishing him well. Stan, who had not spoken to anyone else that day, beamed from behind his white hedge of a beard.

This is what Stan would like: a spot of the right kind of help.

Ella has two mobile phones. She gives one number to a small tight group of friends and her immediate family: people she

trusts. The other number – the one I have – is the number she uses to manage the welfare state: the police, her children's social workers, truancy officers, community officers, health workers – the people she needs to avoid.

To meet Ella you must also visit her, which is why I found myself, ten years ago, standing on her doorstep in grey drizzle and with a police officer for company. We weren't sure if our knocks had been heard above the pandemonium of dogs, shouting and the thumping bass that came from inside. As we waited, I asked the police officer – who I'd seen before – what he had come for. This family cause a lot of problems, he told me; the son is out of control, the neighbours constantly complain. 'I have to come and say what I've got to say.' What happens next, I wanted to know. The police officer shrugged. 'How they take the message is really immaterial. I just deliver the message and I leave.'

When I met Ella she was in her thirties; she'd never had a job or lived a life with predictable routines of any kind. She ricocheted from one crisis to the next. There were arguments with the neighbours and frightening outbursts of violence from her son – some days he threatened her with a knife, and on others he thumped his head against the wall, seemingly more intent on harming himself; her youngest daughter was wasting away, her middle daughter was sixteen and pregnant. Ella described her life as hell. She was angry, aggressive – and also terrified: of her debts, of the loan shark, of the latest eviction notice, about what would become of her children.

Ella desperately needed help, and seventy-three professionals had been involved in just that – trying to help in some way or other. But 'the social', as Ella loosely referred to all those in her life who work for the welfare system, seemed to her to be part of the problem. Their commands and demands are just another noise from which she needs to escape. Ella

resented the stigma and the humiliation, and, after decades of meetings, sanctions, referrals and further meetings, none of which seemed to have made a difference, she would rather be left alone.

Ella would like the welfare state to walk away.

The welfare state cannot flex and provide Stan with the little things that might ease his days. It cannot grapple either with the complex and deep-rooted challenges facing Ella and her family.

Then there are the everyday predicaments many of us are familiar with. At my doctor's surgery it takes three weeks to get an appointment. If it's an 'emergency' you can join the queue for a same-day appointment. This appointment will actually be a phone call from someone whose location is not quite clear. It's better than nothing, so to be in with a chance a long line of the hopeful stretches out behind the surgery door by eight o'clock every morning. After this time the queue will have grown too long. You will be turned away. An overworked receptionist will tetchily suggest you go to the Accident and Emergency department at the nearby hospital, or that you try again tomorrow.

Trying to get inside our welfare systems – to see a doctor, find a good nursery space, counselling for a troubled teenager or a place of kindness and care for an elderly relative – we feel baffled by the unwieldy systems, the labyrinthine processes and irksome rules that seem to stand between us and the support we need.

For those who work within these overstretched systems, the strain is acute. The social workers trying to help Ella face the impossible demands of growing caseloads and the required hours of form-filling on computer systems that always seem to crash or freeze. It's a choice: you can either

close in on yourself, shutting down in order to cope, or you can leave. One in five social work positions in Britain are currently vacant.

This predicament is not unique to social workers. Doctors, teachers, midwives, police, probation officers and public servants seek early retirement. Many others leave to retrain in less arduous professions. These are committed individuals who are exhausted from trying to provide good help within institutions and frameworks that no longer seem to trust their professional judgement or provide the support and space that would make good work possible.

Trying to support the overstretched professionals are thousands of so-called front-line workers, who labour for minimal pay on insecure contracts. They too are distressed by the mismatch between the care that is needed and the resources and time available. One thousand carers – a full 10 per cent of the workforce – leave their jobs every year. They feel isolated and lonely, and that their personal integrity is challenged by norms within which human care cannot be offered. Despite their personal sense of mission and the need for the care they provide, they cannot carry on.

It is not all doom and gloom, you say. And it's true. Most of us have a story to tell about a gifted teacher, a doctor who saved the life of someone close to us, the bravery of a police officer, or the nurse who went out of their way to help. In an emergency our services shine, and even in the everyday there are thousands of good people working to make a difference. But usually this brilliance comes in spite of the system, in spite of the demands and barriers of bureaucracy. Beneath the grace and kindness is the steady thrum of crisis.

In 2017 we had a brutal lesson in system failure. One night in June a fire spread at frightening speed through a tower block in West London. Seventy-one people died – families,

young people, small children, unable to escape through the one stairwell. Many more were injured or traumatised. Our emergency services rushed into the face of danger, heroic in their efforts to save those they could. The community rallied round, donating food and clothing, and offering shelter to those who had lost everything. But in the tragic and shocking aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, the welfare state could not help. Welfare professionals found that the bureaucracy could not flex, that they could not organise the much-needed emotional and financial help, much less shelter and new homes. As the anger and anguish escalated the government decided to act: they drafted in the Red Cross. Just as in any failed state, war zone or extremely impoverished nation, we could not rely on our own structures and systems.

Our welfare state is not fit for purpose. It cannot support us in an emergency, it cannot enable us to live good lives, and it is at a loss when confronted with a range of modern challenges from loneliness to entrenched poverty, from a changing world of work to epidemics of obesity and depression.

It wasn't always like this. In the beginning, the welfare state felt modern and visionary. Those who worked within its institutions felt proud. They derived satisfaction from work well done and from the opportunities to grow as professionals. The welfare state lifted thousands out of abject poverty and provided many more of us with decent homes, a good education and a sense of security. These changes were broad and deep. The welfare state was the foundation stone of post-war society: it gave us both practical support and a sense of who we could be.

But today this once life-changing project is out of kilter. It has become a management state: an elaborate and expensive system of managing needs and their accompanying risks. Those of us who need care, who can't find work, who are

sick or less able are moved around as if in a game of pass-the-parcel: assessed, referred and then assessed again. Everyone suffers in a system where 80 per cent of the resource available must be spent on gate-keeping: on managing the queue, on referring individuals from service to service, on recording every interaction to ensure that no one is responsible for those who inevitably fall through the gaps.

After meeting Ella I made a request. I asked the leaders of the city where she lived if they could also introduce me to a family whose lives had been changed by their interventions. They couldn't. Leaders from the police, fire services, health services, social services, education and youth services could tell important stories about how they had helped individuals navigate a particular crisis, but when asked to tell me about a family who no longer needed help, who had been supported to grow and flourish, they were stumped.

The opposite was happening. These services were seeing the same individuals over and over again; people who – like Ella – seemed tangled and trapped in safety nets that were meant to support them. The leaders of this city were acutely aware of the problem and they wanted to do something about it – it's why they invited me to visit. But what should they do?

The left say that more money must be spent. Our welfare state is still comparatively cheap by international standards and therefore, they argue, more money will solve these problems. In contrast, the right claim that the welfare state is too big and too bloated, hindering the ability of individuals to stand on their own feet. Further cuts must be made, they say, and if the state stopped interfering people would do better. The diagnoses are different but the programmes for action are remarkably similar. Both sides want to focus on the money and to rearrange the institutions. Above all, they want to *manage* things differently.

But management is not going to work. In fact, it might make things worse. The more we concentrate on merely reworking our existing institutions, the more we fail to see or understand the nature of the new challenges that surround us. Instead, we lose perspective and we focus on the wrong things. This is how, some years ago, as the queues in the health system started to lengthen, a group of senior managers turned to Disneyland to learn how to manage their queues. Such stories can make us laugh or lead to quiet despair, but one thing we all know is that managing the queue will not sort out our problems.

Money alone is not the answer either. Of course we need to invest in our social progress, but pouring money into moribund systems will not bring about the necessary change. Equally, starving the welfare state of cash without making alternative provision results in greater costs – human and financial – as problems are displaced onto our streets in the form of crime and homelessness, dissent and alienation.

The blunt truth is that we have reached the limits of our post-war services and institutions. The welfare state is out of step with modern troubles, modern lives and much of modern public opinion. A set of institutions and services designed for a different era is now threadbare and beyond repair. We cannot fix these systems, but I think we can recover the original intention and reinvent it for our times. In this way we can create something new – in fact, it's already happening.

This book is about the new. It's about how we can build good lives for all, about how we can flourish in this century. It is not a book of dreams – about what might be. It is a book about the concrete: new ways of being, organising, living and growing that have been developed with people and communities across Britain.

Thousands have participated in this work – the experiments

that form the core of this book. The solutions that have been developed are affordable. They cost less to deliver and they save money because they bring about change in people's lives. They ensure Ella no longer rotates endlessly within the system and that Stan's loneliness does not lead to the need for another care-home bed that cannot be paid for. In this new system people require less help.

This new way of working and being starts in a different place. The question is not how can we fix these services, but rather, as I stand beside you, how can I support you to create change. The search is for root causes: what is causing this problem and how can we address this underlying issue? And the emphasis is not on managing need but on creating capability: on addressing both the internal feelings and the external structural realities that hold us back. Sitting in Stan's front room or on Ella's sofa I ask what needs to change, how can this happen and who can help?

At the heart of this new way of working is human connection. I have learnt that when people feel supported by strong human relationships, change happens. And when we design new systems that make this sort of collaboration and connection feel simple and easy, people want to join in. This is not surprising, and yet our current welfare state does not try to connect us to one another, despite the abundant potential of our relationships. Each of the solutions in this book becomes stronger as more people participate. This is an approach that upends the current emphasis on managing scarcity.

The vision behind this book – of new ways of living, working and caring – is big. But the creative steps to make it happen are small and simple. 'Is this it?' visitors would ask, unable to mask their surprise as the door to my small workspace banged shut behind them. These visitors – often from distant corners of the world – had heard about the

experiments and expected something grand. Instead they found themselves standing in a shabby room, amidst the clutter of making: the diagrams, the models, the life-size images, the team and assorted collaborators that crowded in.

In 2006 I set up a small organisation called Participle. I wanted to step outside existing institutions and their problems and to focus instead on the questions of what makes a good life in this century and how we might design approaches that enable everyone to flourish. I felt a hunger to work in a different way and a frustration that many previous decades of work had not led to the change I thought was possible.

I wrote a short manifesto setting out my critique of the welfare state and the questions I was hoping to answer. The manifesto brought connections to others – individuals and organisations asking similar questions. It drew the immensely talented team at the heart of Participle – designers, creatives, digital experts, former social workers and public servants, anthropologists and scientists – and it drew collaborators, such as the leaders of the city where Ella lives.

I call our work experiments, in an effort to convey the practical nature of the work – we had our sleeves rolled up and we were trying things out in everyday settings.

Each of the experiments started in the same way: I published a small pamphlet setting out the problem to be tackled. These pamphlets were an open invitation to anyone who might be interested in collaboration. Collaborators came from government, from business and from communities across Britain. They brought funding, expert knowledge, ideas and lived experience. Our purpose was to think again about the challenges we are facing; to listen and to observe. Nothing was off limits and nothing was automatically included. Funds were always tight and we had to work at

speed. We focused on those places where there was broad agreement that the welfare state is not working.

Over ten years we created five core experiments, and each one forms a chapter of this book. We considered the challenges of families such as Ella's, families that are locked out of society without work, health or hope: a very modern form of want. We looked at growing up and the transition into adulthood. The teenager was a concept that had not been invented when the welfare state was designed; today we know these years can be tough but also formative, so we wanted to know what support is needed. We looked at work, which is being transformed by global forces including the digital revolution: what support do we now need to find and create good work? We looked at health: at the modern diseases of the mind and body that now absorb most of our health expenditure, but which went unrecognised or were unknown when the welfare state was devised. And we looked at ageing. It is largely as a result of the welfare state that so many of us are living longer, but our needs in later life are putting intolerable pressure on existing institutions and suffering is widespread.

In each experiment we designed a solution and tested it with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of participants in different settings. Some things worked and took root, others had to be modified. Some did not survive their experimental form and others took on a life of their own, infecting and changing the systems around them. Each experiment stimulated further change and learning, and each experiment enabled change in people's lives.

At the heart of the work was a simple premise: we must make a radical shift that leaves behind the twentieth-century emphasis on managing needs, on sticking people back together once things go wrong. We focused instead on

supporting individuals, families and communities to grow their own capabilities: to learn, to work, to live healthily and to connect to one another. We learnt what support is needed to make this happen.

The experiments showed us, through practice, what need to be the **principles** of modern systems. Modern welfare must create capability rather than manage dependence; it must be open, because all of us need help at some stage in our lives, and when we are thriving many of us have help to offer; it must create possibility rather than seek only to manage risk; and it must include everyone, thereby fostering the connections and relationships that make good lives possible.

The experiments were created through a **design process**. This enabled people from very different walks of life, with different experiences and perspectives, to work together. It enabled us to think wide – to find the underlying causes of our problems – and then to move from analysis to making: to focus on finding and building practical solutions. It enabled us to work at the level of the household and the system simultaneously and to incorporate the business modelling that would ensure our new solutions were affordable and financially viable. In Part III I look at this design process: a system of simple tools and tactics through which every reader of this book can start their own experiments.

This book is about my own experiments because they are the ones I know best, but many people are working in similar ways. The challenge is how to build on this practice and **transition to a new system**. Transitions can be bumpy – in our own lives and similarly in our systems. In the final chapters I look at some of the challenges and suggest practical ways in which we can foresee and navigate this path, growing these new systems and moving what works from the margins to the centre of our lives.

When I got to know Ella a little she told me that she now realised she hadn't understood her problems, that in the grip of crisis she hadn't been able to see things very clearly, 'and when you can't really see what's going on, well, you can't change, can you?' The professional working in continual crisis also loses perspective. And as citizens we do the same. As we confront the challenges of our welfare state we too often get lost in the wrong debates and in building solutions that address symptoms but leave the underlying causes of our problems untouched.

This is why I start by looking at our existing welfare state. I want to understand how such an audacious project was brought into being and what we can learn from that process. I also want to understand what has gone wrong. I have learnt that neither money nor management alone can solve our problems, and I explore why this is the case: why our problems are different in nature; why it is so hard to care within existing institutions; and how poverty itself has changed shape and needs a new approach. Perhaps you are already convinced that the welfare state does not work – in which case, you can turn directly to the experiments.

The experiments tell the stories of those with whom I have worked. These are true stories, although I have changed names, and sometimes altered personal details and locations to protect the identities of those who so generously joined in. I cannot bring every collaborator or member of the Participle team to life in the short pages of this book, but each and every one made an impact on a process that was deeply participative.

This book is principally about Britain, about how to rethink the British welfare state. But the questions and the findings have a wider resonance. I was brought up in Britain and in Spain. I have spent decades working in Africa and

Latin America, and it is largely from thinkers, activists and communities in these continents that I have learnt my craft, and I think what I have learnt has wider application. I also think our modern social challenges – the questions of how to live well, how to create good work, how to create resource on a fragile planet, how to care for one another – transcend national borders. The British welfare state was emulated globally. Reinventing this original and brilliant experiment in our times is a project that similarly reaches beyond national borders.

The Welfare State

how it happened
and why it's not working

On a cold and wet November night in 1942, Londoners formed a queue. Huddled under umbrellas in a line that stretched around a block of government offices, they waited to see a report that civil servants had at first tried to suppress, and then to amend. The publication of this report marked the beginning of one of the biggest social transformations the world has ever seen.

The report, with its pale blue covers and cumbersome official title, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, was known from the outset as the Beveridge Report, after its author Sir William Beveridge. It was a technical blueprint for the modern welfare state. Beveridge set out plans for a free national health service, policies for full employment, family allowances and the abolition of poverty through a comprehensive system of social insurance. The new welfare state was for everyone, and it would be universal in scope.

Half a million copies of the report were sold within three days, and the first edition sold out in a matter of weeks. So intense was the national interest in what Beveridge had proposed that the report was continually reprinted over many