

FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE UNEMPLOYED

WHY THE JUSTICE ORGANISATION IS CALLING FOR A FAIRER APPROACH

Simon Collyer

The difficulties confronting the unemployed, not least in obtaining benefits they are entitled to in a timely manner, and in obtaining private rented housing, are key issues that the Justice Organisation is campaigning about.

The Justice and Unemployment campaign – the organisation's second since its launch last year – seeks to have the unemployed treated as a distinct group in society, so that policies can be directed towards them consistently across Europe. We have petitioned the European Union demanding that the unemployed be protected against discrimination in the form of the 'no DSS' condition so common in advertisements for rented property.

Among the glaring inequalities in the way the unemployed are treated, the centralisation of Job Centre Plus into 20 Benefit Delivery Centres to save money has led to delays in benefit payments and slower processing of new claims. Meanwhile there have been dramatically increasing numbers of administration mistakes, such as lost documents and wrong decisions. Appealing against errors to the Local Government Ombudsmen or Job Centre Plus, for example, can take months, and statistics show complaints against councils, particularly for maladministration, have little chance of success.

Benefit claimants cannot afford to take short term work because of the difficulties of signing back on, and private landlords discriminate against them because of the delays in Housing Benefit payment.

The bigger picture is that the benefits system is creating a hard core of people who feel their situation is hopeless – all this leads to increased crime, homelessness and substance dependency caused by poverty and boredom.

The Justice Organisation was launched with the aim of fighting for causes like this, where there is clear injustice (and, incidentally, very few MPs willing publicly to do anything about it).

Our remit is to promote fairness and fair play in society. We believe all actions or decisions should be considered for their fairness before being enacted. We chose civil rights because we want to work with the business community and business leaders want projects that have a clear 'deliverable' and obvious community benefit. 'Saving the planet' is very worthy but its outcome is too vague and long-term.

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The organisation's first campaign, which is now gathering pace, is called Justice and Sight and concerns the rights of people taken into police custody for whatever reason. An estimated 60% of the population need glasses, and as things stand many of those arrested cannot properly read the documents handed to them during their



Simon with Abbi Roberts in Colchester Castle Dungeon

detention, (such as the Police and Criminal Evidence Code-of-Conduct booklet,) and this can potentially lead to miscarriages of justice. We want all police stations and other detention centres to offer the use of reading glasses as a matter of routine.

We want the initiative to be funded independently, with spectacles stocked in branded wall units, enabling us to put donors' branding in front of people's eyes, quite literally.

In a short time the campaign has made good progress: we have the support of Colchester MP Bob Russell and The Rt Hon Vernon Coaker, Minister of State for policing, security and crime. Divisional Commander David Wakelin of the Association of Chief Police Officers has agreed to us launching a pilot scheme proposed for Essex, with a view to the idea rolling out nationwide.

The inspiration for the Justice Organisation came when I lived in South Africa while running an IT company, and met various people who had been instrumental in fighting apartheid and caring for street children. I started to think I should be doing something to help society too, and that feeling stayed with me after my return to the UK in 2006.

We have many ideas for further campaigns, including one to encourage young people to register to vote for next year's general election; and one to protect the rights of children. On the face of it these issues might appear to be unrelated, but they have in common the goal of achieving fairness for the people they aim to help.

The flexibility to campaign for specific and diverse issues was what led me to set up my own organisation. Civil rights are like fixing up an old house. You pull up one floorboard and you find another that needs fixing underneath.

By Simon Collyer, founder the Justice Organisation