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**A ‘different conversation’ is needed to ensure
a fit-for-purpose 21st Century Welfare System.**

“We so need a different debate about the Welfare State in Britain,” according to the self-described “social activist” Hilary Cottam. She was speaking today, with the BBC Wales Business Correspondent Brian Meechan, at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, while promoting her new book *Radical Help*.

“I wrote the *Radical Help* because I think we’ve got really stuck,” she explained. “The Left tell us that if we just put more money into the existing institutions, it’ll be fine. The Right say: ‘No, no, everybody must stand on their own feet.’ My perception is that the problems we face are actually much bigger than that, and different; neither of those approaches are going to work.”

Referencing data from a wide range of projects and schemes - many successful, a few less so - Cottam believes that potential available resources, in terms of both communities and money, are much larger than is generally thought. “I just wanted to lob a small pebble into the pond and see, together, if we could all start a really different conversation about what might be.”

That includes focusing on a range of different approaches. “To make profound change, we have to step outside our institutions, and ask different questions: not ‘How are we going to fix this service?’ but ‘How can we really understand how people really live?’ and asking them ‘What would you like? What support can we give?’

She insisted she wasn’t being critical of the Welfare System outlined in the iconic Beveridge Report, originally published during the Second World War in 1942.

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“I think that we have got incredible systems, but they were designed in the 1950s, and I think there are three reasons why we can’t patch ’n’ mend what we’ve got.

“One is that our problems are really different; they’re not just things that weren’t foreseen in the 1950s, they’re different in nature. Another is that we have this huge challenge of care; Beveridge swept care of children and older people behind the front door, assuming women would do it for free.

“The third is that Beveridge thought he had solved poverty. He hasn’t; it’s back, and in new, complex forms as well. More and more research is showing that modern poverty is not just about money, it’s about social connection. If you don’t know the right people, you can’t find good work; you can’t be well cared for, and your health isn’t going to be good. Our traditional services just don’t know what to say about that.”

Possibly mindful of her Edinburgh audience, Cottam was most hopeful about the evolution of welfare support North of the Border. “I know of incredible relational practices in Scotland at community level, in some smaller charities and some bigger ones,” she said.

“The Scottish government has also begun to organise itself in different ways, I think it’s really exciting. When I come here, the conversation just feels very, very different, and I think there are much greater possibilities here.”

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