Over the last four centuries a powerful movement has been at work incorporating people into civil society. The seventeenth century was concerned with limiting the arbitrary power of the monarch; the eighteenth century in gaining equal rights before the law. The nineteenth century established the right to vote and the twentieth century focused on gaining economic and welfare rights.

The legacy of four centuries of British politics is now under threat by a failure to recognize that the impact which legislation has on character is pivotal to human advancement. Any responsible public policy reconstruction needs to address and channel the differing roles of self-interest, self-improvement and altruism, which are among the great driving forces in human character.

1. THE NEED TO EXPLORE AND HARNESS THESE HUMAN DRIVES

(i) Self-interest

Self-interest is a fundamentally important part of human nature and its promotion is the most immediate and powerful of our drives. Self-interest is so powerful that it can be morally dangerous when decried or thwarted. Self-interest can illustrate and advance selfishness, although it cannot be automatically equated with it. While much of the aggressive force of self-interest is channelled into self-improvement it must still be regarded as a force in its own right.

Increasingly welfare is now means-tested. A third of the population live in households drawing one of the major means-tested benefits – a


P. Askonas et al. (eds.), *Welfare and Values*  
doubling since 1979. The most deadly charge that can be made against Britain's welfare state is that it increasingly ignores the impact of means tests on character. Instead of attempting to satisfy self-interest in a way which is consistent with the public good, welfare is pitted against self-interest so that the public good is the loser. In means-tested welfare hard work is penalized by the loss of entitlement. Incentives reinforce welfare dependence. Honesty is punished by a loss of income. It is in this sense that welfare is the enemy within. Its rules actively undermine the moral fabric of our characters by attacking and perverting our driving forces. In so doing it eats into the public domain and so helps erode the wider moral order of society.

(ii) **Desire for Self-improvement**

Dominant as self-interest is, it is not the only force shaping our characters and actions. Other drives lie deeply embedded within us. A wish for self-improvement is one such force. It is normal for human beings to desire self-improvement, not merely in terms of education but also in the way we live. In any analysis of human motivation the desire for self-improvement will be prominent.

Self-improvement is one of the great liberating forces and its nurturing should be at the centre of the welfare state's role, not at the periphery. In fact too many of the welfare state's rules operate against this cardinal principle.

(iii) **Altruism**

Altruism is another force deeply embedded within us. Altruistic feelings vary according to the object of the altruism. Consequently it is usually a weaker drive than the others and has less motivational significance. It is usually expressed most strongly in the family, and indeed here it can even be a more powerful influence than self-interest. But the further we move away from the family – to more abstract concepts such as our neighbourhood, our town, our country – the weaker usually are such altruistic feelings.

Yet this weaker motivational force is not only an important part of our true character, needing to be reflected in the world we make around us; it is also that which, though less prominent in individual human beings, is nevertheless more important when it comes to measuring how civilized the society is in which we live. Welfare reconstruction needs to reflect this element of human motivation.