THREE

Exploring double activation

Ireland’s recent history of welfare reform, as discussed in Chapter Two, is a timely illustration of how the social policy turn towards activation and the administrative turn towards market governance unfold ‘as two sides of a single political project’ (Soss et al, 2013: 139). In this case of Ireland, the project was one of moving from a purportedly ‘passive’ model of welfare to one concerned with catalysing employment through ‘job activation of [the] long-term unemployed’ (Government of Ireland, 2012: 21). To achieve this, policymakers turned not only to legislative instruments of conditionality (payment penalties). The street-level organisations tasked with implementing Pathways to Work were also fundamentally reconfigured. The state-run employment service was replaced with an integrated benefits and employment service (Intreo); LES delivered by not-for-profit organisations became subject to tighter performance measurement and monitoring under a different commissioner (the DSP rather than FÁS); and a Payment-by-Results quasi-market (JobPath) was introduced to bolster institutional capacity.

Initially a pragmatic means to bring additional case managers online amidst a temporary surge in long-term unemployment, the market governance instruments of competitive tendering,
price-competition, and performance-based contracting have since evolved to become the default mechanisms for steering welfare-to-work delivery in Ireland. Put simply, Ireland has followed a well-trodden path of extending the project of welfare reform beyond the activation of claimants to the ‘double’ (Considine et al, 2015: 29; McGann, 2021) or even ‘triple’ (van Berkel, 2013) activation of the organisations and frontline workers responsible for implementing active labour market policies on the ground.

This chapter takes a closer look at ‘double activation’ as an analytical lens, and why the concept holds significance beyond describing the conjunction between the two tracks of welfare reform. What is it about the parallel unfolding of governance reforms of delivery organisations that is of wider interest to the shape of activation reform? The chapter also introduces the GAlI study underpinning this book: the research design and how the study differed from previous studies of the impacts of marketisation on the frontline delivery of employment services. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the underlying conceptual linkages between workfare and marketisation, drawing attention to the theories of motivation they share and the ways in which they each involve a normative commitment to the commodification of claimants. Recognising these points of normative and conceptual intersection helps to elucidate why the two reform tracks work in concert, as further examined in Chapter Four.

‘Double activation’ as an analytical lens

At one level, the concept of ‘double activation’ can be approached as a purely descriptive label signifying how ‘welfare reform has initiated a tougher regime of social control, not just for welfare clients, but also for their case managers’ (Soss et al, 2011a: 230). Just as train tracks proceed in parallel, governance reforms of administrative institutions have followed where substantive changes in social security policy have gone. But why
does this matter? Why should we be concerned about attempts to steer delivery organisations through contractualisation and financial incentives above and beyond attempts to discipline the behaviour of claimants? One important reason concerns how governance reforms involve changes in the professional boundaries and organisational conditions in which policy delivery is embedded.

As outlined in Chapter One, the exercise of discretion by street-level workers plays a key role in transposing policy into practice. ‘Transposing’ is a deliberate choice of term, emphasising that frontline workers do not implement policies straightforwardly. Their actions involve elements of policymaking as they determine what to do about complex situated cases that aren’t fully covered under guidelines. Quasi-market reforms invariably remodel this street-level agency in important ways. First, they involve relocating discretion from bureaucrats in state agencies to case managers employed by private or not-for-profit organisations. In so doing, they not only change the types of organisations employing case managers and other frontline workers. They also potentially change the types of workers who are hired to enact policy with citizens.

The workforces of the public, private and community sectors are far from synonymous. Even in similar fields such as education, those working in the different sectors will vary along characteristics such as rates of union membership, qualification, and experience levels. They may also have quite different attitudinal dispositions relevant ‘to the shaping of service provision’ (Sadeghi and Fekjær, 2018: 78), such as their beliefs about social security or the nature of unemployment. To this extent, a long-standing concern about quasi-markets in employment services is their potential to produce a ‘disorganisation of employment relations’ (Greer et al, 2017: 109) at the frontline. For example, by eroding rates of union membership and bonds of solidarity between workers and resulting in workers being employed on less secure contracts and hired on the basis of their relative low-cost rather
than professional expertise. The latter is an especially important concern considering the multitude of studies documenting the de-skilling of frontline workers following episodes of quasi-marketisation (Considine and Lewis, 2010; Schram, 2012; Greer et al, 2017), and ongoing debates about the importance of ‘professionalism’ in activation work.

Chapter Five considers these issues in greater detail, including the extent to which activation work constitutes a form of ‘professional’ practice. Nevertheless, there are important reasons for thinking that the delivery of employment services to people with complex employment-related needs ‘should’ be organised and managed as professional work’ (van Berkel et al, 2021: 2), and that this possibility is being undermined by processes of quasi-marketisation. Put simply, one important way that governance reforms remodel agency is by changing who holds discretion in policy implementation and the professional identities, occupational backgrounds, and worldviews informing its use.

A second way that governance reforms remodel discretion is by restructuring the organisational environments in which policy implementation is embedded through the application of managerialist systems of performance measurement. These systems of managerial scrutiny and performance monitoring aim to render frontline decision-making more visible and accountable to specified goals, but they discipline discretion through changing what Brodkin terms ‘the calculus of street-level choice’ (2011: i259). This is because performance monitoring does more than measure what workers already, or would otherwise, do. It also cultivates different ‘habits of mind’ (Soss et al, 2011a: 208) such as a relentless focus on meeting ‘targets and organisational needs’ (van Berkel and Knies, 2016: 64) in response to the number of job placements achieved by individual staff becoming a focus of intensive organisational monitoring. The result may be a focus on ‘speed-over-need’ (Brodkin, 2011: i266), working to place clients into jobs as rapidly as possible rather than taking the
time to build employability through training with a view to more sustained progressions.

The significance of ‘double activation’ as an analytical lens therefore goes beyond its value as a descriptive label for capturing the convergence between the social policy and administrative tracks of contemporary welfare reform. Rather, it’s critical potential lies in tying these reform tracks together to understand ‘how efforts to discipline service providers shape efforts to discipline welfare recipients’ (Soss et al, 2011a: 209). In other words, how does configuring the delivery of employment services using processes of competitive tendering and performance-based contracting change the way that welfare recipients experience and are targeted for activation? Can we isolate the effects of marketisation on street-level delivery beyond the formal changes in activation policies that accompany such administrative reforms?

The GAll study

Behind this book is an empirical study of Ireland’s ‘mixed economy’ activation, and the ‘pluri-governance’ (McGann, 2022b: 942) approach to employment services commissioning that operated from 2015–2022, when two parallel programmes operating within the same policy space and time were procured through different governance modes. This is distinct from forms of ‘hybrid governance’ where different modes of governance are threaded together to form an overarching framework that is ‘hybrid in nature’ (Benish and Mattei, 2020: 282) but which steers all programme delivery within a given administrative field. Ireland’s mixed economy of activation was coordinated not by ‘hybrid’ but by ‘pluri’ governance. Employment services programmes that were otherwise functionally similar were coordinated via discrete governance modes. In the case of JobPath, market governance instruments of competitive tendering, outcomes-based payment models, and price competition were the central coordinating mechanisms. LES,
by contrast, were commissioned predominantly through closed contracting and procedural accountability for inputs (‘costs-met’ funding). Although targets and performance measurement were increasingly used by the DSP to steer the delivery of LES, providers’ funding was not tied to their performance in the way that it was for the JobPath providers. Another potentially important difference between the two programmes is the fact that JobPath was delivered by private firms whereas LES were delivered by place-placed not-for-profit and community development organisations. However, besides these differences in how they were commissioned, the two employment services programmes otherwise coalesced in policy time and space. Both were targeted towards claimants who were long-term unemployed or deemed at ‘high risk’ of becoming long-term unemployed; and they each operated under the same Pathways to Work activation policy setting, with its emphasis on job-search conditionality, the completion of PPPs, and threat of sanctions.

There have been multiple previous studies of quasi-market reforms and their impact on frontline delivery (see especially Bredgaard and Larsen, 2007; Considine et al, 2015; Greer et al, 2017; O’Sullivan et al, 2021). This book builds upon this important body of work. Nevertheless, few studies have been able to synchronously compare frontline delivery under different governance conditions, and where alternative instruments coordinate delivery in the same policy field at the same time. The uniqueness of the GAll study lies in how it leveraged the degree of administrative overlap between JobPath and LES to pursue synchronous comparative research on the intersection between workfare and marketisation. It did so through a multi-pronged, mixed-methods approach involving (i) survey and interview research with frontline delivery staff, (ii) interview research with key policy practitioners (civil servants, government advisors) and other stakeholders (executive managers of contracted providers), and (iii) in-depth interviews with service-users about their experiences.
of participating in welfare-to-work programmes. This enabled
data to be triangulated from different sources to enhance the
robustness of the findings, with the total dataset comprising 64
in-depth interviews gathered over three waves of qualitative
research and 189 survey responses from frontline staff as further
outlined next.

**Frontline workers**

Core to street-level research is a focus on ‘opening up
the “black box” of policy implementation’ (Caswell et al,
2017: 1). Researchers use a range of methods to do so, of
which observational fieldwork is among the most powerful
(Zacka, 2017; O’Sullivan et al, 2021). This is for its capacity
to provide ‘a window into actual service encounters as they
happen’ (O’Sullivan et al, 2021: 58), and to expose areas of
‘behaviour that are harder, if not impossible, to reach by other
means’ (Brodkin, 2017: 133). Direct observation of JobPath and
LES staff was however not possible because the fellowship that
supported data collection was from January 2020 to December
2021. Ireland, like most other countries, was grappling with
the COVID pandemic for much of this period. In-person
appointments were effectively suspended, although contracted
employment services did continue to operate remotely via
telephone or online appointments. So, the method relied upon
was a combination of survey research and in-depth interviews
with frontline staff.

The research approach facilitated questioning JobPath and
LES frontline staff about programme delivery in more typical
times, outside the pandemic, which was an extensive focus
of both the survey and interview research. Nevertheless, it
must be acknowledged that relying on workers’ self-reports
to illuminate how they use their discretion has its limitations;
not least because participants may tell researchers what they
think researchers want to hear rather than what they actually
do (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). To some extent, the study’s
mixed-methods approach mitigated this risk in that the frontline research data could be triangulated against data from other sources to check the veracity of what JobPath and LES staff reported.

The survey research was undertaken from 1 July to 14 August 2020. A total of 189 frontline staff completed the survey, including 77 JobPath staff and 112 LES staff. This may seem a small number of respondents, although it reflects the scale of contracted out provision in Ireland rather than a low response rate. Across the country in 2020, there were only 170 mediators (as advisors are known in LES) working in the LES. Based on the estimates provided by Seetec and Turas Nua, the JobPath providers only employed approximately 253 advisors between them. So, the response rate varied from 30 to 65 per cent.

For the purposes of the survey, frontline staff were defined as employees who work directly with jobseekers to find employment as part of their jobs. As shown in Table 3.1, this predominantly included employment advisors or mediators although it also included some site managers and staff whose job it was to broker placements with employers. Both JobPath providers participated in the survey, as did the network of 22 LES organisations, with senior managers in those organisations circulating details about the study to all their staff and inviting them to participate in the online survey. Consequently, the organisational coverage of the survey is very broad. Further details of the survey sample such as the age, gender, and qualification levels of respondents are reported in Chapter Five, which examines in-depth the differences between the two frontline workforces.

The survey data were analysed using SPSS software, with variations in response tested for statistical significance at the 5 per cent level. The Mann-Whitney U-test (a nonparametric equivalent to the independent samples t-test) was used in cases where the dependent variables were continuous. This allowed for testing the significance of observed differences in the dependent variable for JobPath and LES staff even though data
were often asymmetrically distributed. For ordinal dependent variables, Fisher’s exact test of independent was principally used due to the small number of responses on some items which precluded the use of the chi-square test.

The survey questionnaire along with the full dataset of responses is available open access via the Zenodo repository (see https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5513839). Altogether, respondents were asked approximately 60 questions about various aspects of how they did their jobs, the extent to which their performance was measured by their employer, what they saw as the priorities when working with jobseekers, and about their own occupational backgrounds and attitudes towards welfare and unemployment. The questionnaire was developed from that used by Considine and colleagues in their successive studies of the frontline delivery of employment services in Australia, the UK, and the Netherlands (Considine, 2001; Considine et al, 2015). The most recent iteration of that work was in 2016, when more than 1,200 Jobactive staff in Australia and several hundred Work Programme staff in the UK were surveyed about their agency practices and personal approaches to delivering welfare-to-work (Considine et al, 2020b; McGann et al, 2020). A particular advantage of this approach in the context of studying Ireland’s mixed economy of activation is that it offers the potential not only to compare internal differences between marketised and non-marketised service provision in Ireland but also to compare the Irish quasi-market to its UK and Australian counterparts.

Following the survey, 20 respondents were interviewed in-depth between October 2020 and January 2021. These interviews were conducted via phone and Microsoft Teams to explore early findings from the survey data in greater depth, including how JobPath and LES staff viewed activation and the managerial regimes and systems of performance measurement they worked under. The interview sample was evenly balanced between JobPath and LES staff (see Table 3.1). It included employees from both JobPath agencies and eight different
Table 3.1: Frontline research participants by gender, job role, and location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Survey respondents</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JobPath (n = 77)</td>
<td>LES (n = 112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undisclosed or missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job role</td>
<td>Advisor/mediator/case manager</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer liaison/broker</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locations (counties)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LES organisations, as well as a mix of advisors/mediators, site managers, and staff who worked as employer liaisons. Most of the managers and employer liaisons had also previously worked as advisors and could therefore discuss their experience of working in a case management role.

Policy practitioners

Besides the frontline interviews, further interviews with nine key stakeholders and policy practitioners were conducted at various intervals. These interviews focused on the
commissioning process and the dynamics between the DSP and its contractors; exploring issues around contract design, the funding model, and the performance framework used to steer employment services. The interviewees included an official from the administrative unit of the DSP overseeing employment services contracting, an independent researcher/consultant who advised the government during the *Pathways to Work* reforms, a senior JobPath executive, five LES coordinators responsible for organising regional networks of LES managers, and a union official representing employment services staff.

**Service-users**

The final wave of research involved in-depth interviews with 35 former and current service-users about their experiences of welfare-to-work programmes. These interviews were conducted by phone between April and August 2021, following the completion of the research with frontline staff. Consequently, the interviews explored service-users’ perspectives on, and experiences of, similarities and discontinuities between JobPath and LES that were observed in data from the research with frontline staff. This included exploring what un(der)employed people found helpful or unhelpful about the nature of the support they received from different providers; the extent to which they were referred to job vacancies, training, or work experience programmes; how their experience of contracted employment services compared with the support they received from Intreo; and whether they felt treated with dignity and respect by providers and frontline staff.

Service-users were recruited for interview in several ways, including via the Twitter and Facebook accounts of Maynooth University’s Social Sciences Institute and online discussion fora for jobseekers. The Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed – a federation of community groups, trade unions, welfare rights centres, and unemployed people that is
officially recognised by the DSP – also assisted in promoting the research via social media and email distribution lists. Additionally, parallel services used by jobseekers such as Money Advice and Budgeting Services and Adult and Further Education colleges were approached to advertise the research to any of their clients with experience of JobPath or LES.

A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure that the interviewees captured varied experiences by age, gender, and location. As shown in Table 3.2, interviewees came from a broad range of age groups as well as different parts of the country. This was to ensure that the sample captured a balance of service-users across different providers. A limitation of previous qualitative studies of people’s experiences of JobPath is that they are focused almost entirely on people’s experiences of services delivered by Turas Nua (Finn, 2021; J Whelan, 2021; Boland et al, 2022; Whelan, 2022). This stems from the locations of that research (Cork, Waterford, Wexford, and Kildare) which are all counties where Turas Nua is the only JobPath provider. This body of work has been vital in giving voice to the perspectives of the people most impacted by welfare reforms, but it only offers a partial picture. To address this, the JobPath service-users interviewed for the present study were almost evenly balanced between people who had been clients of Turas Nua (15 interviewees) and people with experience of Seetec (16 interviewees). Ten interviewees were former or current clients of LES, including six who had experience of both JobPath and LES.

As shown in Table 3.2, most service-users were former clients rather than jobseekers at the time of being interviewed. Indeed, only 11 interviewees were clients of employment services at the time of being interviewed, although in the bulk of cases people’s most recent experience of employment services was within the previous 24 months. One important reason for interviewing former clients was so that the study could explore people’s experiences before COVID-19, when meetings with advisors were still face-to-face and payment penalties (which
were suspended in March 2020) were still in force. Were the interviews restricted to only people who were participating in employment services at the time of the interview, this would have produced a very atypical understanding of people’s lived-experiences of welfare-to-work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Female (n = 19)</th>
<th>Male (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Under 30 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 0–39 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 40–49 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 50–59 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 60+ years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most recent experience of activation</th>
<th>Female (n = 19)</th>
<th>Male (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Participating at interview</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2018–20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Before 2018</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participated in</th>
<th>Female (n = 19)</th>
<th>Male (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• JobPath:</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urtles</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urtles</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Local Employment Services</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Female (n = 19)</th>
<th>Male (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Border (Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim, Louth, Sligo)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dublin</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• South Leinster (Laois, Offaly, Kildare, Kilkenny, Wicklow)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Munster (Cork, Clare, Limerick, Waterford, Tipperary)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notwithstanding the attempt to ensure that the interview sample included a broad range of perspectives by age, gender, and location, there is always the danger of selection bias in research of this nature. Often, the people most likely to volunteer to be interviewed will be those with grievances to report. This can skew the data towards negative assessments of employment services. Hence the importance of triangulating data from different sources, as the GAlI study enables through its multi-pronged and mixed-methods approach to data collection.

All interviews were fully transcribed, and a copy of the de-identified transcript (all names used are pseudonyms) was provided to participants for verification. The transcripts were then coded, using NVivo software to help organise the coding of the data, and based on a framework analysis approach (Gale et al, 2013). This relies on consistently coding cases according to pre-defined codes drawn from the literature and emergent recurring themes (and continuously checking previously coded transcripts against emergent themes). Cases (interviewees) are then grouped by variables of interest – for instance, the type of employment service interviewees participated in or worked for – and systematically compared across relevant themes to identify commonalities and differences across groups of cases.

**Intersects between workfare and marketisation**

Drawing on the GAlI study, subsequent chapters consider in detail the practical effects of when workfare meets marketisation. This is in terms of how a marketised implementation structure changes:

1. the balance between the enabling and demanding elements of activation, as examined in Chapter Four;
2. the professional, organisational, and managerial contexts in which the delivery of welfare-to-work is embedded; and
3. the occupational backgrounds and professional identities that street-level workers bring to their work, as discussed in Chapter Five.

Before proceeding with that analysis, it is worth pausing to consider some of the key conceptual features that workfare and marketisation share in common. These include a mutual orientation towards the commodification of non-employed labour and the presumption of a shared theory of motivation that emphasises the ‘bad agency’ (Wright, 2012: 310) of welfare recipients and street-level workers. Unpacking these conceptual symmetries sheds important light on the symbiosis between workfare and marketisation as ‘two sides of the same coin’ (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2005: 330).

**Commodification**

One basic feature that workfare and marketisation share is the commodification of claimants’ labour in the sense of treating it as a fungible resource to be extracted for profit. This commodification of non-employed labour is the stated objective of workfarist activation but also the foundational logic of quasi-marketisation (Grover, 2009; McGann, 2021; O’Sullivan et al, 2021), operating as the doxa of contemporary welfare reform. Non-employed labour exists to be traded on the market. Not to do so is to be a dependent, ‘free-riding’ on the labour of others, whereas the path to independence lies in gainful employment. Hence the proclamation of the then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, when launching the second iteration of *Pathways to Work* (2016–2020) that he wanted ‘to see people independent in work, not dependent on welfare’ because ‘a job is the best route out of poverty’ (DEASP, 2016).

Whether jobs are synonymous with routes out of poverty is of course a matter of some dispute (Patrick, 2012; Seikel and Spannagel, 2018). It might be true in aggregate terms, but it is also the case that activation policies shape labour market
conditions in highly salient ways that influence the quality of the available employment pathways (Dean, 2012; Greer, 2016; Raffass, 2016). It is important to recognise that ‘activation is part of the framework that gives rise to certain labour market forms rather than just being a response to labour market conditions’ (Fuertes et al, 2021: 434). There has been a lively debate in the Irish context over whether post-crisis reforms have intensified rates of low-pay and in-work poverty (see Murphy, 2016; Collins and Murphy, 2021; Dukelow, 2021). The country has one of the highest incidences of low pay in the OECD, with close to a quarter of full-time workers classified as low paid (Collins and Murphy, 2021), meaning that their annual income is less than two-thirds of median annual income.

This debate concerning the intersection between activation and Ireland’s low-pay economy reflects a long-standing concern that workfarist policies are less concerned with ‘creating jobs for people who don’t have them’ than with ‘creating workers for jobs that nobody wants’ (Peck, 2001: 6). To put it provocatively, workfare is not about employment inclusion but about ‘pimping the precariat’ (Dean, 2012: 358). The argument here is that demanding activation works to exploit labour ‘as a disposable commodity available at a discount’ (Dean, 2012: 358). Grover goes so far as to argue that the ‘ratcheting up’ of conditionality inherent to workfare constitutes a regime of ‘violent proletarianisation’ whereby the prospect of ‘immiseration’ is structurally deployed to force people ‘to commodify their labour power’ (2019: 350).

This critique of the political economy of workfare draws on Esping-Andersen’s typology of the worlds of welfare capitalism, which differentiates between ‘worlds of welfare’ according to the extent to which different regimes allow citizens to subsist independently of the market. From this perspective, the post-war era was a heyday of de-commodification. Enhanced benefits in terms of coverage and value coupled with investment in public services provided a substitute for wages and services that would otherwise have to be purchased. Access to social security provided scope for workers to refuse, without pain of
starvation, employment that was poorly paid. This is less and less possible due to the enforcement of conduct conditions that ‘ratchet up’ (Greer, 2016: 169) the pressure on claimants to join what critical political economists, following Marx, term the reserve army of labour; the surplus population of non-employed workers that serves as a readily available supply ‘for the lower end of the labour market’ (Peck and Theodore, 2000: 123). The size and material conditions of this reserve army shape the degree to which employers can extract profit from acquiring labour. Workfare policies reinforce the reserve army mechanism by threatening the withdrawal of benefits as punishment for ‘resistance to low-quality employment’ (Raffass, 2017: 354). Labour market competition thus becomes more intensified, enabling wages and conditions to be eroded.

Participants interviewed for this book were acutely aware of this political economy of workfare. Several eloquently articulated how the intensification of job-search conditionality under Pathways to Work serviced employers with a fungible supply of workers for low-paid jobs, questioning “what the hell these activation things are about anyway” other than “forming people to put them into a private industry that a lot of the time is highly exploitative” (Frank, service-user, 50s, Clare). As Frank elaborated: “All we are doing is creating that conveyor belt of willing workers, and when they’re finished with, they are thrown back on the scrap heap and reshaped and put into something new that needs more human staffing.”

The cycle of ‘low pay, no pay’ was likewise reflected upon by another former service-user who questioned “the thing of where you just find a job [and] there’s nothing about job satisfaction or the right job for you”. Ultimately, in her experience, it leads “people to take jobs that they don’t like, and they end up back on social welfare anyway because they’re not happy in their roles and their demoralised” (Claire, service-user, 50s, Dublin).

A vivid example was provided by one interviewee, Aisling, who recounted how she “literally took the worst job possible”
working in a hospitality job “that didn’t pay minimum wage, didn’t have breaks, didn’t have a contract” just so she could “get away from JobPath” and the ‘ritualised humiliation’ (Charlesworth, 2000, cited in Wright et al, 2020: 284) of being forced to attend what she likened to “poverty class” (Aisling, service-user, Dublin, 30s). In another example, a single mother recounted feeling “bullied and harassed” into a junior store assistant role in an off license just “to keep them off my back”. She described the job – which involved “lifting and packing up boxes of alcohol and putting them through the online system” for eight hours a day – as “absolutely backbreaking” (Natasha, service-user, Dublin, 50s). This was as Ireland was emerging from a national lockdown and Natasha had been holding out for a receptionist job in a nearby gym that was due to shortly re-open. A friend working at the gym had assured her of getting the job once it reopened, but Natasha worried that her payments would be cut if she waited any longer:

‘They were hounding and hounding … I thought, “I’m just going to have to get something because they are just going to send me off anywhere” … And I felt very threatened … that I could get cut off the labour for nine weeks if I refused to go for jobs that they were suggesting to me. So, I felt under so much pressure to literally take anything that would get them off my back until this sports centre one came up.’ (Natasha, service-user, 50s, Dublin)

The experiences of Aisling and Natasha jar with assessments that the use of sanctions ‘is very modest’ (Cousins, 2019: 39) in Ireland. Insofar as neither Aisling nor Natasha were actually penalty rated, their experiences also convey how the potency of sanctions as devices of conduct conditionality stems not from their enforcement but their possibility ‘as a coercive threat hanging over all jobseekers’ (Finn, 2021: 77). That is, it is not primarily their application but their existence ‘as a threat to
prevent non-compliance’ (Boland and Griffin, 2018: 100) which gives welfare conditionality its governmental power.

If workfare constitutes a means of ‘administrative re-commodification’ (Holden, 2003: 314), quasi-marketisation involves what could be considered the ‘hyper-commodification’ (McGann, 2021: 29) of claimants. This arises from its role in multiplying how claimants’ labour is commodified by the state, to create new possibilities for extracting even further profit from non-employed labour.

When employment services are competitively tendered and funded via Payment-by-Results, jobseekers are effectively organised into purchasing lots ‘for which private agents bid to win a share of the services to support them, discipline them and make money from them’ (O’Sullivan et al, 2021: 7). Successful bidders win the right to sell the unemployed for profit in the very real sense of earning outcome payments and service fees that are higher than the investments they make in promoting claimants to potential employers. In this way, marketisation extends how the labour of welfare recipients becomes ‘an object of calculation and exchange’ (Adkins, 2017: 300).

Employment services markets therefore do more than just streamline administrative re-commodification. They transform the ‘commodity status’ of surplus labour by constituting an intermediary space where third parties (contracted providers) can buy and sell that labour ‘in a manner that any other commodity might be sold in “free” markets’ (Grover, 2009: 501). Put simply, they multiply the dividend that can be extracted from claimants’ labour.

Again, this was something that several interviewees seemed all too aware of. As one person who had spent two years on JobPath put it, “You are just a number to be dealt with for financial reward” (Jim, service-user, 40s, Dublin). For these participants, outcome payments were interpreted as “commission” that providers extracted from selling them into jobs – “a horrific commodification of other people’s circumstances” (Kevin, service-user, 50s, Tipperary). There
was a palpable fury in how several spoke of their awareness that they were essentially a commodity: “They just want to chase this fee that they are getting. I believe they get €3,000 for every person they get into [employment] … I just don’t think they care about the person; they care about the money” (Ray, service-user, 30s, Offaly). “They actually get commission for everyone they get off the labour. I was furious when I heard that. Then it all made sense. It was like, she didn’t actually give two shits about me, she really didn’t. She just wanted to get me off Jobseekers” (Natasha, service-user, 50s, Dublin).

Of course, third parties profiting from the exchange of labour has been a feature of capitalism since the emergence of labour hire firms in the early 1900s (Grover, 2009). But in the case of labour hire firms, jobseekers do at least have exit options and a formal right of refusal. In employment services markets, by contrast, the possibility of incurring sanctions means that claimants have little option ‘but to cooperate in their state-sponsored hyper-commodification’ (McGann, 2021: 29). This distinction was succinctly expressed by one interviewee in her account of being referred to JobPath just months earlier. Reflecting that she wouldn’t mind so much if “it was part of a government agency”, Hannah described how her “heart sank” when “the letter came through the door … It shattered me, it truly shattered me. I don’t know whether this is relevant or not, but I feel like I’m after being sold by the state to this … company. And I’m furious as hell about it, but there is nothing I can do” (Hannah, service-user, 50s, Cork).

**Governing (knaves) at a distance**

The second point of intersection between workfare and marketisation is their underlying theory of motivation. Each begins from the assumption that claimants and service workers are somewhat deviant agents who cannot be relied upon to work hard without the use of external incentives. From this perspective, unemployment and benefit receipt are primarily
viewed as motivational problems to be treated with behavioural remedies that appeal to agents’ ‘purposive rationality’ (Morris, 2020: 276) rather than structural issues requiring demand management. Importantly, this diagnosis applies both to the motivations of claimants but also to the service workers tasked with supporting them to find employment (Le Grand, 1997, 2010; Wright, 2012).

The ‘pathological’ (Stambe and Marston, 2022: 4) theory of unemployment underpinning workfare is well-documented. It has its origins in ‘underclass’ theories of ‘dysfunctional poverty’ (Mead, 2014: 95), which date back to at least the Victorian era. Such theories resurfaced with force during the early 1980s via the arguments of Conservative welfare reformers such as Charles Murray and Laurence Mead, who each denounced claiming benefits as a ‘moral failing’ (Boland and Griffin, 2021: 51). The two differed over the degree to which they believed welfare recipients genuinely aspired to work, although they each attributed the rising welfare caseloads observed in America at the time to the generosity of payments and the fact that claimants had ‘too many other sources of income … to work reliably unless programmes require them to do so’ (Mead, 1986: 13).

Murray notoriously positioned welfare as a lifestyle choice made by claimants acting in response ‘to the reality of the world around them’ (1984: 162) and the very low wages on offer at the bottom of the labour market. Essentially, he regarded claimants as ‘rational skivers’ (Gaffney and Millar, 2020) who deliberately chose welfare over work whereas Mead argued that claimants genuinely aspired to work but were ‘enfeebled’ (Boland and Griffin, 2021: 51) by dependency and a fatalist ‘belief that their fate turns on forces outside of themselves’ (Mead, 1986: 146). Either way, both saw the solution as requiring a paternalistic ‘politics of conduct’ (Mead, 2014: 97) enacted though ‘“people changing” programs’ (Hasenfeld, 2010: 163) of reform. Case managers were to become ‘the “engineers” of advanced liberalism’ (McDonald and Marston, 2005: 381) in this new
politics of conduct, tasked with rehabilitating the agency of claimants by ensuring they ‘do not mangle on welfare and become “dependent”’ (Stambe and Marston, 2022: 3).

This attribution of unemployment to the idleness and failings of claimants has yet to penetrate Irish policy discourse to the extent that it has other liberal welfare regimes (although see Gaffney and Millar, 2020; Power et al, 2022). However, it is circulating beneath the surface of activation discourses and hiding in plain sight in the Pathways to Work statements as well as in political pronouncements such as the assertion made by a Minister for Social Protection that people ‘come into the (social protection) system straight after school as a lifestyle choice’ (quoted in Power et al, 2022: 649). The first Pathways to Work strategy similarly redirected attention away from the structural causes of unemployment by prescribing a need ‘to encourage [jobseekers] to be more active in their efforts to find work’ and criticising Ireland’s previous ‘passive’ approach for ‘the development of a significant core of long-term unemployed’ (Government of Ireland, 2012: 10 emphasis added). Again, the implication was that it was insufficient work-effort on the part of claimants which was partly to blame for Ireland’s rising unemployment.

The service-users interviewed for this book recalled being continuously reminded of this responsibility to be more active in their job-search efforts through the “veiled threat” (Donal, service-user, 30s, Clare) written in bold on referral letters. For instance, one interviewee who had participated in three different rounds of JobPath reflected on the “psychologically injurious” assumptions that DSP communications conveyed about the agency of claimants:

‘They have this sentence in big black letters on every letter … It gives you the impression that you’re naturally inclined to be lazy and stupid. And I don’t feel that I’m naturally inclined to be lazy and stupid. But I think if somebody kept telling me that, it might have an effect
on my dignity … “You’re lazy and you’re stupid. And if we don’t keep kicking you, you won’t even get out of bed in the morning”. That’s the impression that you get. And it’s the only section in bold type.” (Padraig, service-user, 40s, Tipperary)

Padraig’s remarks highlight how workfare is ‘steeped in’ (Marston and McDonald, 2008: 267) a theory of claimants’ agency that is deeply stigmatising. Conduct conditions are legitimated by positioning claimants as either rational skivers who are wilfully unemployed, or idle dependents who are listlessly unemployed.

Such a presumption of ‘bad agency’ (Wright, 2012: 310) also implicitly lies behind the governance turn towards marketisation, although in this case it is the presumed idleness of service workers that is discursively targeted. As Le Grand argues, core to the NPM reform paradigm is ‘a particular view of human motivation’ (1997: 150) that assumes public service workers are ‘knaves’ motivated by little more than their own self-serving interest as opposed to the ‘competent and benevolent’ (1997: 155) professionals that proponents of classical public administration positioned them as. This questioning of the motivation of public service workers stems from public choice theory in economics, which grew to prominence in the 1970s and early 1980s as an influential critique of bureaucracy and the public provision of services. This was a time of rising public expenditure. Public choice theory, which assumes that all agents – regardless of whether they are politicians, bureaucrats, or entrepreneurs – are driven by ‘rational utility maximisation’ (Talbot, 2010: 62) sought to explain this rise in expenditure partly as a function of bureaucrats’ rent-seeking behaviours. Public choice theorists argued that bureaucratic organisational structures emboldened public servants to try to maximise their salaries and personal power, meaning they could never be trusted to deliver ‘what they are supposed to nor to serve the community’ (Torfing
et al, 2020: 60). This was due to the weakness of bureaucratic accountability mechanisms and their associated vulnerability to principal-agent dilemmas.

Principal-agent problems arise when there is a misalignment between the interests of shareholders (principals) and the interests of the managers (agents) running enterprises on their behalf. In listed companies, principals want to maximise profitability to increase dividends whereas managers seek to increase their salaries without a corresponding increase in work intensity. So, the self-interest of managers conflicts with the interests of shareholders insofar as it diminishes the profitability of the company. Public sector organisations are argued to be especially vulnerable to principal-agent problems due to the scale of the information asymmetries that exist in large bureaucracies, the diffuse nature of the principal’s interests in the context of public services, and the public’s weak control over administrators. In enterprises, the interests of principals and their agents are aligned through performance and accountability instruments. These include contracts detailing agents’ obligations to principals, systems for measuring the performance of agents against key indicators (revenue or share price growth), and financial incentives (performance bonuses) for agents to pursue goals set by the principals. NPM and market governance approaches apply much the same logic to resolving principal-agent problems in the public sector: introducing performance measurement and performance-related pay within bureaucracies and controlling delivery agents through auditing systems and ‘the incentives inherent to competitive markets and performance management’ (Torfing et al, 2020: 61). The theory is that ‘if the right “incentive” structures between “principals” (the government) and “agents” (public service organisations and workers) can be put in place, and agents’ performance against these incentives properly measured, substantial improvements can be made’ (Talbot, 2010: 63). To this extent, quasi-market structures and their associated regimes of performance ‘targetry’
Exploring Double Activation

(Talbot, 2010: 63) are an attempt to harness the self-interest ‘of those working in the system to the public good’ (Le Grand, 1997: 159).

The extent to which public choice theory has informed quasi-marketisation in Ireland is not entirely clear. On face value, the argument for quasi-marketisation was pragmatic rather than theory driven. It was about filling a void in the capacity of the system that could not be met through increased public provision due to the then freeze on public sector hiring. Positioning the creation of JobPath “as a creature of the last recession”, a DSP official explained that “what was attractive at the time was the capacity to scale up and scale down” (Jeremy, DSP). Nonetheless, an examination of the Fine Gael/Labour Government’s post-2011 reform agenda reveals that public choice theory ideas were also circulating in the background to propel the case for wider public sector reform.

In its 2011 programme for government, the Fine Gael/Labour Government championed the need for public services ‘to become more transparent, accountable and efficient’ so that they serve ‘the common good, not sectional interests’ (Government of Ireland, 2011: 28). Decrying the ‘persistent under-performance’ of Ireland’s public services, it set out to ‘pin down accountability for results at every level of the public service … with clear consequences for success and failure’ (Government of Ireland, 2011: 28). Thus, it traded on the (public choice theory) idea that rising public expenditure during the pre-crisis years was linked to the inefficiency of the public sector, the unchecked pursuit of self-interest by public servants, and a deficit of accountability for performance.

These were themes taken up by one of the policy stakeholders interviewed for this book, an independent advisor active in consulting with the DSP during the early years of the Pathways to Work reforms. He reflected on the multiple considerations informing quasi-marketisation, one of which was the need to create “some sort of incentive to get people to enthusiastically encourage people to search for work, and get it” (Lance,
independent advisor). To reiterate his point, he compared “the days of FÁS” when:

‘[N]obody was watching what you achieved in terms of getting people back to work or getting people into employment. So, there would always be the tendency for agencies or organisations or bodies that are not driven by some sort of competitive incentive system to revert back into a fairly comfortable work environment where nobody was looking at the bottom line – which is, how many people do you get back into the jobs.’ (Lance, independent advisor)

Regardless of whether such an incentive paradigm logic was indeed the original impetus for reform, measuring service providers against the ‘bottom line of results’ has clearly become the DSP’s favoured means of steering providers. To this extent, when asked about future commissioning models beyond JobPath, a DSP official maintained “it would be difficult to envisage that we wouldn’t have an element of Payment-by-Results for that … I don’t think that would be really considered”. Echoing central ideas from Osborne and Gaebler’s *Reinventing Government* that ‘Accountability must shift from inputs, such as line items, to outcomes and results’ (Osborne, 1993: 354), he was dismissive of the LES’ ‘costs-met’ funding model and the transaction costs associated with it:

‘What we should be measuring is their employment performance. But what we seem to be measuring, or spend a disproportionate amount measuring, is why do they have such high energy bills, or they need a lot of software this year. … It’s in nobody’s interest to be wasting time on things like that. But it’s just the necessity of a costs–met model … [that] the Department needs to monitor expenditure in a fairly detailed way, which kind
of distracts from what the focus should be on, which is employment outcomes.’ (Jeremy, DSP official)

We can see from this discussion how workfare and quasi-marketisation are essentially ‘cut from the same neoliberal cloth’ (Soss et al, 2013: 138). To solve unemployment, each ‘look[s] “downstream”’ (Wright, 2012: 312) at the recalcitrant agency of welfare and administrative subjects. If welfare caseloads continue to rise, then this is a problem to be remedied by recalibrating the incentives for claimants to increase their job-search intensity. And if activation programmes fail to achieve policy goals this is because their administrative design is not adequately calibrated to ‘serve the self-interest of the people delivering that policy’ (Le Grand, 2010: 60). Claimants are to be governed as reluctant jobseekers who ‘need to be financially incentivised to sell their labour’ and delivery agents as self-interested knaves ‘who need to be financially incentivised to place people in paid work’ (Shutes and Taylor, 2014: 214).

Note

1 ‘Triple’ activation denotes the extension of activation ‘beyond the unemployed individuals who are policy’s official subjects, to the organisation which are policy’s implementers, to the street-level staff who are policy’s putative producers’ (Brodkin, 2013b: 11). However, most uses of ‘double activation’ incorporate the activation of delivery organisations and frontline workers so the terms are synonymous.