

Memoir of a former Beneficiary
By Anonymous

After 18 years as a dependent child and five years as a student, I remember becoming unemployed. In fact it was a promotion, in 1984 I got more on the dole than I had as a student.

I also had some part-time history research, not enough to affect my benefit, and my student flat was subject to Muldoon's price freeze. The freeze was a bit of a farce (because fresh produce was exempt), but it meant that my rent was frozen at \$23 a week. There was no accommodation supplement, and although there was an accommodation benefit I did not need one.

I continued going to classes for interest only and doing the research for six months until I became long-term unemployed and they put me onto a work scheme.

That was how it worked then. After six months you became long-term unemployed and eligible for a PEP (Part-Time Employment Project) Scheme. It wasn't bad, mostly local government, who received a government subsidy and topped it up to make a reasonable rate, equivalent to a salary. Then after six months you were unemployed again and had to wait another six months before becoming eligible again. Someone said the trick was to get work in the winter and have the summer off.

Also the 1984 Labour government had just been elected, so I joked that I now had an obligation to go and get a job. I felt no such obligation under Muldoon.

Because I was a graduate, they did not send me out scrub cutting. Instead I went to the City Council Archives for an Oral History project. One irony was that I knew the woman who was employed as an archivist. She had dropped out of university without completing her degree and here she was employed in a permanent position above me.

I joined the project after it started, so when it finished I was still eligible for another scheme and so got more than six months employment.

So once it finished I was unemployed again. This time without any part-time work and I had finally ended my addiction to going to classes. Maybe the rent had gone up. More of more friends had gone and got jobs and left town. I assessed my life, how long did I want to stay in the same city going nowhere? I set myself a goal of going overseas within two years of graduation.

Actually it was more than two years before I left on my overseas experience, unless you count service overseas with the NZ Army, but that is another story.

Anyway after another six months unemployed I found work. By this stage the government had cut back on PEP schemes, but I got a subsidy for being long-term unemployed anyway. The Labour Department weren't much help in finding a job. The Student Job Search used to send me copies of the graduate

positions available in the Public Service, but with Rogernomics that was changing too.

It was my brother who rang to say that there was a job in a hotel near where he worked, part of the same chain. He rang to ask me to get him tickets to see Billy Connolly who was coming to town, and mentioned that there was a barman position available at hotel, that was part of the same chain he worked for. The Labour Department couldn't find the listing, and when I rang I found that it was because the position had been taken. But they were looking for a kitchen hand and I could have the job if I wanted. They weren't interested in my qualifications, I could have been illiterate or straight out of prison for all they cared. It was in a remote tourist area, but live-in with accommodation included. I remember completing the census that year: Qualifications: University Degree or higher. Occupation: Kitchen Hand. Duties: Cutting vegetables, washing dishes and taking the rubbish out. I think I worked there for three months. It was an interesting experience, a bit like the film *Experience Preferred*, but not *Essential*, if you can find the movie. I gave the employer my Job Plus card, and I think he was still getting round to apply for the subsidy when I left for my big OE.

After about three and a half years overseas I was back in my home town briefly where I registered as unemployed. It was a small town with a high unemployment rate, mostly seasonal work in the freezing works. I said "there is no danger of actually getting a job here is there?" and the case manager agreed. Anyway I was contacted by Interpol and had to go back to Britain immediately after that. At short notice all they could get me was first class on British Airways. British Immigration weren't exactly pleased to see me back, and only let me through because the police were waiting for me.

The shortest visa they could give me was six months. After that I took a trip to America where I actually had a visa and accommodation, all above board. But come the end of November my visa for Ireland (and Canada and America) was expiring and so it was time to leave Thatcher's Britain. It was the end of her reign. I remember hearing news of her resignation on the radio in the morning, probably the 9 o'clock news. She had just fought off a leadership challenge, and decided it was time to quit with dignity. It didn't seem real until later in the day when word went round the high court (the Old Bailey): Maggie's gone. We didn't talk politics with the court staff.

On the flight to Singapore, John Major was confirmed as her successor, and I arrived back to Jim Bolger's New Zealand. I thought that it was all right, I had lived through National governments before. I went and registered with the Department of Labour (DoL) as a job-seeker and then went home to see my parents after a year away. The Labour Department warned me that I had to register with the Social Welfare Department with ten days to get a benefit.

I rang to make an appointment. The receptionist asked my surname, and then put me through to an extension. The phone rang and rang and rang and rang and rang. Nobody answered. I gave up and called again. Again the receptionist put me through to the extension for my surname. This time

someone answered. He said "hang on a minute" and then cut me off. I rang again. This time I explained to the receptionist that I just wanted to make an appointment, and explained the problems I had with the first two calls. She said that I was probably cut off because he couldn't hear me, and said she was having problems hearing me. She had been hearing all right until them. She put me through to the first extension, the one that did not answer. I gave up and went in person to make an appointment. The first available date was the following week where I saw an officer, who said that it was now more than two weeks since I had registered with the Department of Labour. I pointed out that this was the soonest they had been able to see me. Why should I be penalized for their failure to deal with me in a timely manner? He said that it would be all right. It was not. My application was taken from my registration with Social Welfare, with one week stand-down, plus one week in arrears, instead of my registration as a Jobseeker with the DoL. Then the 1991 benefit cuts kicked in.

I went and filled in a form to make my first Review of Decision about the failure to pay from my first date of reps. This took three months before they write back and said that I was right and gave me my arrears. Only because I was assertive enough to go and insist in writing on my rights. I did not know the law then, but I understood the basic principles of what is right.

I recall asking about a couple of jobs at the DoL. One was a supermarket position, where they insisted that job was not for me - they wanted an 18 year old out of school with no qualifications. Similarly there was a live-in position with a backpacker's hostel, with really anti-social hours. Again they made it clear that I was not expected to take that job.

I did apply for jobs and kept the rejection letters. "Dear Sir, Thank you for your interest in the position. Unfortunately, due to the high quality of the applicants, we are not even going to consider interviewing you."

I was lucky to get two job interviews. One was as library assistant, where I was short-listed as one of eight for two positions (so I had like one quarter of a chance). I was interviewed by two women with hexagonal glasses who explained that although they still had glide time, I would be expected to work to their very demanding standards. I was almost relieved not to get the job. (Maybe it was because I was not a lesbian).

The other interview was at the Public Library, where I knew the woman interviewing me. I didn't get that job and remembered that every time I went to the library.

I had to cancel my insurance. They sent me a renewal letter including someone else's details. I went in to the insurance company to cancel. I told them that I could afford to pay because I didn't have a job. I asked if they had a job putting things in letters. I said I could even put things in the wrong envelope but they did not laugh.

I had to cancel my NZ Credit Card because of the fees. I kept my British Credit Card because it did not have many fees. I had a problem paying it off though.

I went into Trustbank because I had a Visa card issued by the British equivalent, TSB (Trustee Savings Bank). The bank teller ignored me when I said that it was a Trustbank card. She explained that it was from Taranaki Savings Bank, like I was stupid and did not know who issued my credit card. She called a manager who explained that it was a TSB card and as they were not Taranaki Savings Bank they could not accept payment. It is amazing: you can take money out in over 165 countries, but you can only pay back in one (or three, possibly USA and Canada). I had to resist the urge to reach across the counter and smack their heads into the card each time they said: "that's a TSB card from Taranaki Savings Bank". I wonder why it had a £50 cheque guarantee printed on the back.

These people had jobs but I didn't. Maybe society regrets that now that I am an advocate.

I did get some temp work. I even had a regular job - Saturday mornings once a month. I decided to declare it, mainly so I could keep it above board and put it on my CV, like I was doing something. This caused problems with Social Welfare as it was just enough to affect my Accommodation Supplement, which replaced the Accommodation Benefit in 1991 and became important after the benefit cuts, as now people had to apply for extra, now that the benefit rates were lower.

After a month or so I rang to say that I had earned twenty dollars. The operator complained that she wished I hadn't bothered as it was not worth it, as it just made more work for them.

So after that the work finished and I stopped declaring my extra income. I waited to get my two dollars a week back from my benefit. I lodged another Review of Decision to complain that my benefit had been cut. One of my favourite quotes was when they explained: "No sir, your benefit hasn't been cut, it is your accommodation supplement. It has been re-assessed. "

Cut or re-assessed, I wanted my two dollars a week back. As I was on the dole, I missed two dollars a week.

Nothing happened, so I went and made an appointment to see an officer. At my appointment he sat on one side of a counter and I sat on the other while he looked up my details on the screen. He printed out a breakdown which showed how much was my benefit. I was interested to see how much was my benefit and how much was my accommodation supplement, as I just knew that money appeared in my bank account. I asked if I could have a copy of my benefit details. He said no. That was before I understood my rights under the Privacy Act.

After a year I got a letter from Social Welfare saying my dole was going to stop because their computer had been told by the Department of Labour's

computer that I was no longer registered as a jobseeker. So I went into the DoL pretty smartly to tell them that I still wanted to be on the jobseeker register. They said that I had missed an interview. Not a job interview, a how are you getting on after one year unemployed interview. They put me back on, but later this caused problems when I applied for jobs which required someone to have been registered six months or more to get a subsidy. I explained that although my current registration was December 1991, I had been registered continuously from December 1990 to December 1991. Even though they had taken me off and put me back on, where had I been in the meantime? I am sure that kept the number of long term unemployed down. I explained this to one Case Manager, that I said that I was not my fault, I had not received any letter saying I had an interview. I overheard him explaining this to "my officer" who said "well he would say that wouldn't he." None of my other mail went missing. (That officer is now a Work and Income Case Manager).

I went home again to see my parents for Christmas. At that stage I did not know that the work test does not apply from 25 December to 15 January. But I figured that I had been reliably unemployed for 50 weeks of the year, and nobody had found me a job, so that I was entitled to take a couple of weeks off.

When I returned in January, I found another letter saying my benefit was going to stop, this time because I had started work. Great, where? It seemed that the computer had got excited and sent out 7,000 letters from Mr I Smith, Production, possibly to everyone who had activity in the past month. I rang in to enquire where the job was and was told to ignore it. Great. But how did I know what letters to ignore and which ones were important?

My friend had a job at Radio New Zealand and he spotted a story. The media had tried to contact Mr I Smith, Production, but it seemed he was unavailable. It wasn't that he didn't exist, it was just that he no longer worked there. As still happens, the system is like a huge machine with no one in charge to stop it. So I did a radio interview which went out the next morning. I said that it was sort of like a reverse lotto, in that you did not know what the computer was going to spit out each week.

Shortly after the interview went to air, I got a phone call from Social Welfare, awfully apologetic, could I please be so kind as to bring the letter in. I went in and asked to speak to Mr Ross. The receptionist said: "Have you got an appointment?" "No, but my name is XXXX XXXX, he is expecting me."

Jo or Jane beneficiary have to wait to be seen, different treatment for people who talk to the media.

Actually I didn't get to see Mr Ross. I let them take a copy of the offending letter, but kept the original. I never heard any more about it.

In those days the unemployed had to send in monthly declarations, every four

weeks you got a form which you had to sign and return saying that your income had not changed, the number of children in your care was the same, that you were still actively seeking employment and you still wanted the benefit.

After some time they stopped including a post paid return envelope. At first I tried sealing the letter down and marking it Return to Sender. That worked the first month, but the next time I must have ripped the letter opening it and so it did not get through. After that I took the letter in to deliver by hand. I certainly didn't want to spend money on a stamp.

I stopped buying newspapers. I remember that the price went up to 50 cents and I realised that was a luxury I could not afford. I read other people's newspapers, and went to the library to read them for free.

Anyway after another year unemployed in the 90s, I went in for my annual renewal. I had long since stopped looking at the job boards regularly, but because I was in there I copied down three potential jobs. I had long since found that it didn't matter how many jobs were listed, they was never any work at the end of it. I had previously complained about waiting twenty minutes or more to ask about a job listed, only to find that it had been taken.

The problem was caused by listing the jobs more than once. For example if the job was part-time clerical, such as I was interested in, they would list it once under "clerical", and again under "part-time work". That way it looked like there were more jobs than there were really listed. I felt like asking for a job taking down all the job notes that were gone. So they improved the system, and the receptionist would check on line to see if the job was still current, before telling you to wait to see an officer.

Once I actual got a job at the Employment Service office. I found a computer where I completed an aptitude test. I answered a whole lot of questions about my likes and dislikes and what I was good at etc. I said that I liked working with children and old people, that I had some experience with bombs and explosives, and I had some knowledge of the law. The answer came up with a 46% correlation with Minister of Religion. There was nothing about faith (do you believe in God?). Anyway I thought this was funny, so I wanted a print-out. I found how to connect to a printer and made a copy. When I did this, someone waiting asked for help using the computer. He was Indonesian and needed help with his CV. He completed an online CV (fill in boxes) where his answers were a bit esoteric: "What are your hobbies and interests: Engineering." "What do you do in your free time: Read engineering manuals." I said they want to know what sports do you play and asked if he played rugby, because I thought it was funny. No he didn't, he was weedy little Indonesian. Anyway I had a job for an hour or so helping him and later he asked me for a reference.

Some years later I went on a five day Job Action Workshop. I had asked another beneficiary advocate before hand and had learnt that the two most

important things about the Job Action Workshop were that they had lunch provided, so put in your special meal request, and keep your bus ticket because they will reimburse travel. Just keep the first bus ticket and then you can walk the rest of the time. Anyway at the Job Action Workshop I told them that I only called in at the Employment Service when I was feeling depressed and in need of a bit of a laugh. They said that wasn't the right attitude.

So at the end of my second year of unemployment in the 90s, I had an annual interview at DoL and asked about three jobs listed. One of them was not taken, but "they weren't taking any more applications". (So is it available or not?) I can't remember another one, but finally there was a work-for-the-dole scheme. Unfortunately it was taken. But because of the interest I had shown, there was another one coming up at the same place so I would be considered for that.

That's how bad it was: I had to apply for a voluntary work position before it even came available in order to work part-time for a travel allowance. One government department paid me \$15 a week for working three days a week (for which they invoiced the DoL). Another government department (Social Welfare) paid me about \$150 for not working the rest of the week. Something sounds wrong there. Actually it was not too bad. Once I sorted out walking to work and bringing my own lunch, I actually got to keep the \$15, which was a nice tidy little tax-free allowance on top of the dole. I had a place to go and use the fax and photocopier, and read the in-house job vacancies in the staff room.

At the time I did not consider the implications of taking a Community Task Force position "voluntarily". If I had quit without a good and sufficient reason, I could have been penalized. I just enjoyed having something to do and somewhere to go. There were two fairly menial jobs to do, one of which required at least functional literacy, but I was able to alternate one boring job in the morning with another boring job in the afternoon.

I could say to people: I work at XXXXX XXXXX. I didn't say "I do voluntary work 3 days a week from 10 to 3 for a travel allowance." I just said I work there.

After six months they said they were so impressed with me coming in voluntarily that they would consider me for a full-time position for the next six months. It seems that government funding was available under Task Force Green. They did not say that it was an election year and that it would be very good if the number of employed went down, especially long-term unemployed like me.

Actually it was not much of an improvement. I only got about \$50 a week more that the benefit plus the \$15 travel allowance, and now I had to work full-time. And it was more boring, just doing the same thing five days a week, 9 to 5.

One interesting thing was that there were three others on the project, plus someone else who was funded as a "supervisor". There was a very attractive young blond woman who got quite involved with me at the Christmas Party and afterwards. Then she didn't want to speak to me. I considered laying a sexual harassment case, but realised I would have to say that I didn't enjoy it at all.

Anyway after six months the project was completed and the government re-elected and I was unemployed again.

3,949 words.