



# Economic Mythbusters course

**Week 7: 25<sup>th</sup> June 2013**

**Myth: “Strivers v. Skivers: the workless are worthless”**

## **Transcript of QPSW consolidation session**

*Presented by Symon Hill, QPSW Temporary Programme Co-ordinator*

Good evening, Friends, and welcome to the Quaker-specific part of the session. Some of you may remember me from Week Three. I'm Symon Hill and I'm working with Quaker Peace & Social Witness.

I hope you've found this evening's discussions helpful so far. It seems particularly important to counter the “Strivers v. Skivers” rhetoric, which, as was said earlier, helps the government to justify policies that harm people in poverty. Many right-wing newspapers have developed this with stories of individuals who are supposedly cheating the system to claim taxpayers' money. They've developed a particular line in suggesting that many people in receipt of disability benefits are not really disabled.

Of course, blaming the poor for their own poverty is nothing new. John's Gospel tells the story of Jesus meeting a blind beggar. His disciples asked whether the blindness was punishment for the man's own sins or those of his parents. Jesus insisted, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned”.

This evening's session was a reminder of the power of language. This is something that Quakers have always recognised. The early Quakers talked about “plain speech”. Not only did they seek to avoid untruthful expressions but they also addressed everyone as an equal. This lives on, of course, in the Quaker testimony against using titles.

Language is never neutral. Language helps to promote particular values, or to undermine others. As we heard earlier, the phrase “hard-working taxpayers” divides society into people who work hard and pay tax, and those who do neither.

I suggest that as Quakers with a testimony to Truth, it is important to recognise just how much this phrase upholds policies and attitudes that are fundamentally untruthful. As Anna and Julia pointed out, there are many people who work hard at unpaid or poorly paid work, as well as others who move between employment and unemployment.

It's also worth noting that we are all taxpayers. While not everyone pays income tax, everyone pays VAT. Hard work is talked about in a way that implies that rich people are rich because they work hard. But most people in the UK live and die in the same social class that they were born in. Most rich people are rich because their parents were rich.

I also wonder why we always speak of "hard work" as if it were by definition a good thing. Doesn't it depend on the sort of work that is being done? Dick Evans, the former head of the arms company BAE Systems, used to boast that he worked every day from 7.30am until 11.00pm. I think this is supposed to be impressive. Given that he used his long hours to sell weapons to dictators, I'd really rather he'd spent more time in bed.

But how can we challenge the "Strivers v. Skivers" rhetoric in our own communities? There's some questions that we can ask ourselves. How do those who are part of a group that's under attack – such as benefit recipients, unemployed people or disabled people – stand in solidarity with those who are? If you feel that less privileged people are not represented in your Meeting, it may be important to talk with those Friends who are less privileged, or with groups representing less privileged people in the area, to ask them what you can do to stand alongside them, rather than going to them with your own solutions.

Friends in at least one Meeting are monitoring their local papers, ready to write in to the letters page to challenge articles that demonise and marginalise people. I think this is a great idea. When doing this, try to remember that while statistics are important, so are personal stories. If you can refer to someone who's been unjustly hurt by austerity, this will stick in people's minds.

Please tell us your own ideas for challenging cuts and demonisation. You can share them on the Quakernomics site at <http://www.quaker.org.uk/quakernomics>. While you're on the site, you can also sign up for *Earth & Economy*, our newsletter about issues of faith, money and sustainability. If you let us know stories of what's going on in your own area, we can include some of them in the next issue.

This is, sadly, the last session of Mythbusters. We hope you'll find ways to share what you've learnt with your Local and Area Meetings. You could write something for the Meeting newsletter or website, if you have one. You could ask for a slot to talk about the issues that have come up. You could invite someone from QPSW or the New Economics Foundation to speak.

Although NEF have run this course, QPSW has paid the cost for fifty Quaker participants. If you can afford to do so, please make a donation towards the cost. It has cost us around £37 per participant.

You should very soon receive an email with a brief evaluation form that will help us to learn from you and improve how we do things. Please take a few moments to fill this in. If you're participating as a group, we ask that you each fill in the form, not just group co-ordinators. NEF have also sent out an evaluation form to all participants. It asks different questions, so it would be really helpful if you could complete both.

Some participants have asked us "what next" after the course has ended. Others have said that they would like to make connections with other Mythbusters participants. I'm sure you'll be doing a great deal without our help, but we would like to help to keep up the momentum generated by the course. Resources are limited so please let us know what you would like us to do. Ideas include QPSW sharing participants' contact details to help the sharing of ideas and expertise.

Another idea is to have some sort of physical gathering for Quaker Mythbusters participants later in the year. Please tell us what you think.

It's a privilege to work alongside Quakers all over Britain who are working for just and sustainable economics. I would like to finish by reading from *Advices and Queries*; the 33<sup>rd</sup> advice:

*“Are you alert to practices here and throughout the world which discriminate against people on the basis of who or what they are or because of their beliefs? Bear witness to the humanity of all people, including those who break society’s conventions or its laws. Try to discern new growing points in social and economic life. Seek to understand the causes of injustice, social unrest and fear. Are you working to bring about a just and compassionate society which allows everyone to develop their capacities and fosters the desire to serve?”*

Thanks very much and many blessings on your mythbusting. Goodnight.