



# ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

## Struggling with benefits

An ongoing debate we have in this country is whether those benefiting from social services are deserving or not. Many query whether our system is in fact way too generous.

Several ask if our politicians have what it takes to make the right decisions when it comes to the distribution of benefits and if the resolve is conditioned by the right motivations or whether political ramifications seem to keep them away from taking the important and tough choices.

Let's face it, we have perceptibly come across numerous reports that have been signposting this phenomenon of social exclusion that is undoubtedly affecting vulnerable groups in Malta and the struggle that a segment of our citizens have to face day-in day-out. For some, life is purely uphill, an effort and a tussle where people experience inequality, some or many slip through the welfare net and many others are victims of stigmatisation.

It is interesting to note that *The Guardian* discusses very patently; "Hundreds of thousands of poor people say they have been put off applying for or collecting benefits because of the perceived stigma generated by false media depictions of "scroungers" – leading many to forgo essentials such as food and fuel, a new report claims."

Well I don't know if this is the case in Malta but that we automatically qualify people who use benefits as loafers is something we do all the time.

There are in fact many who still believe that those receiving support from the State are essentially 'a let-down', fronting a social and public policy episode referred to as 'benefit stigma'. In my opinion this is not the

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case and most people who are benefit users are in fact deserving and consume social services because they really need them.

That doesn't mean that there aren't those who abuse the system. However, these are a minority element that need to be trapped and fixed, no doubt about that. We also need to understand what prompts people to behave in this way and whether there are cultural elements that encourage this behaviour. The need to introduce checks and balances that will prevent this from happening again is crucial. Maybe the system occasionally does lend itself to abuse or perhaps becomes a vote catching incumbency that has been ingrained in our political system.

So where is this perception of 'undeservingness' coming from?

In many people's eyes those 'bleeding' the coffers through social benefits are considered fraudsters, that is to say; the unemployed (who are 'not both-

ered' to 'look for' let alone 'find' a job), ex-prisoners and ex-drug addicts, those with lots of children and single parents amongst others. These 'populations' are all blamed at being entranced in having benefits served on a silver platter without taking on any responsibilities. A significant portion of citizens still feel that people on welfare benefits are not taking the slightest forbearance route to life. Some even add that 'they' are better-off living on assistance and hence are undeserving and being given an unreciprocated gift. Furthermore it appears to be the prevalent acuity that petitioners of aids are unworthy, claim falsely and commit fraud. But is there any truth in all of this?

To better understand 'benefit stigma' and the long-term implications of this portent we need to reflect on the following; 'to what extent is claiming benefits stigmatised', 'what are the drivers that advantage stigma' and 'what is the impact of welfare shame'.

I feel that there is also another facet to this debate.

Dishonour is magnified due to circumstances whereby people applying for benefits have to wait in long queues (which communicate benefit claimants as being low in status); a lack of privacy (having to spill the beans to get themselves any help) and looked at suspiciously when requesting services.

The perception on benefit users needs to change.

People benefiting from help need to be seen as deserving, are provided support in the right

measure and that a 'spring board culture' is embedded in every benefit thus ensuring that people are enticed to bounce back into their community better equipped to face their challenges, rather than becoming hooked on the system. Pension beneficiaries need to be seen as having gained the right for this support.

Let's not kid ourselves.

We have poor, vulnerable and excluded people in our community, people who are living hand to mouth and the slightest predicament will have an immediate negative impact on them for many different reasons. Others experience exclusion because of social conditions that bar them from being fully immersed in their communities.

We need to make sure that society guarantees the values of liberty and equality. We need to keep unearthing ways how to get citizens to participate and entice the community as a whole to nourish and take care of itself. It is vital that we create the necessary configurations that ensure the involvement of the citizen. All of this will bring the much needed change in perception, whereby benefit patrons are no longer seen as letdowns but as front-runners to the changes they would like for themselves.

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## ~~Versace~~ ~~murdered~~ ~~on his~~ ~~doorstep~~

Italian fashion designer Gianni Versace has been shot dead on the steps of his Miami mansion.

The incident happened shortly before 9am as the 50-year-old designer returned from the fashionable News Café where he bought breakfast and Italian newspapers.

Witnesses described a white man in his mid-twenties taking a gun from a backpack and shooting Versace twice in the back of the head as he unlocked the gates to his Ocean Drive home.

A gun was found with discarded clothes in a red Chevrolet pick-up truck abandoned in a car park.

### Prime suspect

Police have traced the weapon to Andrew Cunanan, 27, a gay prostitute with an "affluent clientele".

He is already on the FBI's most wanted list in connection with four other murders – all of the victims were, like Versace, homosexual.

Miami police chief Richard Barreto described Cunanan as the sole suspect, but he did not know if he had any relationship



with Versace.

Hundreds of people have gathered opposite Versace's three-storey, Mediterranean-style home, the only residential building in the art deco section of Ocean Drive.

Police have sealed off the area round the blood-stained steps to the house – Casa Casuarina – where Versace lived most of the time with his friend Antonio D'Amico.

Around the world Versace's stores have been closing as they received news of the tragedy.

Tributes are pouring in from the many rich and famous friends who enjoyed wearing Versace's flamboyant designs.

Amongst them Princess Diana has issued a statement saying she was "devastated at the loss of a great and talented man".

Versace had just released his new winter collection and a glamorous television launch planned for the Spanish Steps in Rome has been cancelled.

With the help of his sister Donatella and his brother Santo, Versace transformed the family firm into a multimillion-dollar fashion empire.