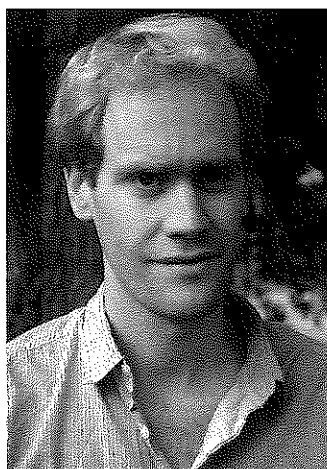


And another thing...

"Most internships are jobs first and learning experiences second."

Work experience is just institutionalised exploitation, reckons James Martin.



"WHAT'S SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE IN DESIRABLE PROFESSIONS WOULD BE UNTHINKABLE FOR TRADITIONALLY WORKING-CLASS JOBS."

As the dust settles after the MPs' expenses debacle, there's another scandal that should be, but sadly isn't, engaging mass sanctimonious ire. As recently as April, the offices of MPs in Venue's orbit have been advertising for interns. Judging by the list of qualities the candidates should have and the details of the duties they would be carrying out, very real work is expected of them, yet they will receive no pay. Indeed, Westminster is underpinned by a stratum of unpaid junior staff, numbering around 500 in Parliament alone. At best this is ethically dubious; in all likelihood it's illegal.

The justification for not paying interns often comes down to their being volunteers. This sounds reasonable but, according to the Department for Business Information and Skills, which sets out the regulations, a volunteer has neither set hours nor work that they are expected to complete - either of these would make them a worker, with an implied contract, and eligible to receive the national minimum wage (NMW); a right they are unable to waive. Do the legion of Westminster interns voluntarily forgo pay? No, they aren't offered that choice. Some are offered flexible, part-time hours, but it's worth a bet that the moment they choose to 'volunteer' too few hours, they are asked not to bother coming in any more and a more giving replacement is found. It's casual, institutionalised exploitation of young people's pursuit of an aspirational career. Calling them a volunteer or an intern

doesn't change this or the fact that NMW regulations are being ignored, just as calling them a stuntman wouldn't make their duties any more exciting. The reward of getting a paid job at the bottom of the career ladder is not even guaranteed - when the placement is over, they're more likely to get another internship than a paid contract.

Alas, MPs aren't the only ones at it. Glamorous and desirable industries and professions all do it (yup, including print journalism). Bristol and Bath are hotbeds of media and creative industries. I could point you in the direction of several companies that use unpaid workers for months at a time. People tend to defend this with one or more of a combination of standard responses. The most popular is that it's just the way it works; as an unskilled, inexperienced worker, the only way to get started is to work for free. But, there'd be uproar if this attitude was adopted across all industry. What's socially acceptable in desirable professions would be unthinkable for traditionally working-class jobs - ponder the headlines if it was discovered that factory workers were being asked to work unpaid for the first month, and were even then not guaranteed a paid contract at the end of it. Yes, it feels a lot less like exploitation when it's a bunch of Julians and Sophies who can afford it - but that's just it, by structuring the entry level of businesses with unpaid positions, whole demographics of capable and talented career-seekers are excluded from getting a foot in the door.

And as for the argument that it's just the way it is? Thankfully, women in the workplace no longer

have to silently endure a roll call of nasty practices and unpleasant attitudes; likewise a progressive society should question worker exploitation. You'll hear it reasoned that without these unpaid jobs there'd be no opportunities for newcomers. But this notion that whole industries would stop taking on inexperienced staff is bogus. Instead they'd be forced to pay junior employees, and perhaps rediscover the merits of nurturing and developing their staff.

Most internships and work experience positions are jobs first and learning experiences second - like any job. If employers were honest with themselves, they'd admit that the motivation for engaging a free worker is the work that needs doing. It's time we embraced the idea that the NMW wasn't brought in so that it could be used selectively by employers, least of all by the very people who brought it into law.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW YOU CAN CLAIM PAYMENT FOR UNPAID WORK YOU HAVE DONE, PAST OR PRESENT, CONTACT HMRC. FOR GUIDELINES ON NMW ENTITLEMENT CALL THE NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE HELPLINE ON 0845 600 0678.

