

The 'un-politics' of child poverty

In recent years there has been a great deal of political activity directed towards the goal of 'eradicating' child poverty in the UK. The Child Poverty Act enshrines this goal in law, two child poverty strategies have been published and, at times, a great deal of progress has been made. However, it now seems very likely that if current trends continue, the 2020 targets will be missed.

Steve Crossley argues here that there are also things that have not been done to tackle child poverty, decisions that have not been made and topics kept off the political agenda that are, perhaps, more likely to help us achieve a society that is genuinely and permanently free of poverty.

The politics of child poverty

In 1999, Tony Blair declared we would 'end child poverty for ever', arguing that it would take 20 years to achieve this goal. Since then, politicians, civil servants, researchers and activists have devoted time and energy to understanding how this aim could be achieved. A Child Poverty Unit has been established. The Child Poverty Act received cross-party support when it became law in 2010. An independent Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has been established and has produced reports on the government's progress. Two governmental child poverty strategies have been published and consultations on new measures of child poverty have taken place.

A number of charities have sought to influence policy direction, highlighting specific issues which they believe should be taken into account. Think tanks have also been active on the subject of poverty, with the Centre for Social Justice, the think tank established by Iain Duncan Smith, perhaps unsurprisingly, being one of the more 'influential' organisations in the formulation of poverty policy. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has published numerous reports exploring poverty and deprivation, and is currently preparing 'the first evidenced anti-poverty strategy for all age groups and each UK nation'. Numerous academic contributions covering the experiences of people living on low incomes, the representation of poor people by

politicians and the potential for social policies to improve the lives of poorer people have been written. The recent welfare reforms and cuts to services to vulnerable people, alongside a hardening in the rhetoric used by some politicians and media commentators to discuss problems of poverty, have led to an increase in grassroots campaigns aimed at challenging potentially damaging policies and the often stigmatising language about people on low incomes.

In summary then, a lot of activity has taken place. The majority of this has tended to focus on what has been done, what is currently being done or what effects current policies are likely to have. In contrast, not nearly as much energy has been devoted to examining what was not done, what is not being done or what could be done but is not yet being discussed. Ruth Levitas has suggested that social policy tends to explore pragmatic and piecemeal solutions to social problems and can effectively get 'stuck in the present'. She argues that wider ranging, more expansive policies which attempt to join up different areas and which 'envisage in a holistic manner the society we are trying to build' are much rarer.¹ This is certainly the case with the UK anti-poverty policies and narratives, which often appear to focus on poor people themselves, rather than poverty, as the problem to be solved. This focus allows the question of the role of 'other' people and of wider society to remain on the periphery of policy development.



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In their book *Power and Poverty*, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz introduced the concept of 'non-decision making':²

... a means by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated before they are even voiced; or kept covert; or killed before they gain access to the relevant decision-making arena.

A 'non-decision', therefore, is one 'that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker'. Matthew Crenson develops the idea in *The Un-politics of Air Pollution* and he highlights how 'some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out'.³ In suggesting that the things which are organised out of politics or suppressed are potentially key issues which need to be uncovered, he goes on to argue that 'the proper object of investigation is not *political activity* but *political inactivity*'.⁴

headline figure) as 'less than 10 per cent of children who live in *qualifying households*' living in the relative income group (emphasis added). During the scrutiny process of the Child Poverty Bill, the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) noted that the qualifying households identified in the legislation potentially excluded 'some groups, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, and asylum seeking children'. It went on to argue: 'The legislation is therefore, on its face, designed to require policy-making to prioritise such children over others, including Roma children, children in children's homes and asylum seeking children.'⁷ In terms reminiscent of Crenson's view of issues being organised into or out of politics, a submission to the JCHR enquiry on children's rights argued: 'The poverty of certain children under immigration control is not being eradicated, it is being *written out of the picture*.'⁸

More recently, the government's consultation on 'better' measures of poverty could be understood as an exercise in un-politics and non-decision making. While publicly declaring a commitment to the existing income-based measures of poverty, the government sought views on the importance of potential measures, such as unmanageable debt, family stability and parental health (including drug and alcohol dependency). The consultation exercise was viewed by a number of commentators as being an attempt to 're-define' poverty and marginalise the importance of income at a time when welfare reforms were cutting the incomes of many low-income families.⁹ At the time, Alison Garnham noted that it 'made sense' that 'the government would want to develop a measure that is less sensitive to social security cuts in order to obscure the effect that these are having on the lives of vulnerable children.'¹⁰ She went on to note other examples of non-decision making: there being no analysis of child poverty in the annual autumn statement; the government delaying answering parliamentary questions about child poverty; and the refusal to publish the impact of universal credit regulations on children 'on the grounds that they do not believe the current metrics are robust'.

It is, however, the recently published government *Child Poverty Strategy* that provides perhaps the best opportunity to explore both decision making and non-decision making in relation to poverty policies. Four key areas are highlighted within the strategy, with a chapter devoted to each. 'Tackling child poverty now', the first chapter, focuses on the role of work in ending child poverty, but largely neglects the issue of in-work poverty and low wages, and

The focus of this article may be on the contemporary 'un-politics' of child poverty, but it is important to note that, just as Britain has a long history of activity on tackling poverty, it also has a long history of inactivity and ambiguity towards it. Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith were credited with 'rediscovering poverty' in the 1960s, when it was widely assumed that the development of the welfare state and rising living standards following the end of the Second World War had all but seen off poverty in the UK. John Moore, the then Secretary of State for Social Security, famously declared 'the end of the line for poverty' in a speech in 1989, declaring that claims about the extent of poverty at that time were 'utterly false'.⁵ In 1996, an article in the *Guardian* highlighted how Britain had 'quite deliberately done nothing' about the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty by arguing that the recommendations in the UN initiative 'principally relate to the needs of underdeveloped countries' and that Britain already had 'the infrastructure and social-protection systems to prevent poverty and maintain living standards'.⁶

Following Tony Blair's speech and the activity highlighted above, poverty is undeniably on the political agenda in the UK and all major political parties recognise this. This does not mean, however, that non-decision making in relation to poverty has ended.

For example, the Child Poverty Act sets the target for relative low income (often used as the

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provides little detail on opportunities to escape poverty for those people who cannot work because of illness, disability or caring responsibilities. The second chapter, 'Supporting families' living standards', brings together a number of small-scale, somewhat disjointed, proposals to reduce the cost of utility bills, children's food and transport, most of which had been announced already. The chapter on 'Preventing poor children from becoming poor adults' focuses primarily on raising educational attainment and how poor children can be supported to do better within the current education system. No mention is made, however, of the many advantages enjoyed by children whose parents can afford private education. The fourth and final chapter, 'Working with businesses and local areas', begins with the statement: 'Central government action cannot, by itself, end child poverty.'¹¹ This deflection is at odds with recent research, which highlights that it was precisely central government intervention that drove the falls in child poverty under the previous government,¹² and, as John Veit-Wilson has pointed out previously:¹³

Ensuring that all the members of society, residents in or citizens of a nation state, have enough money is a clear role which governments can adopt or reject, but they cannot deny they have the ultimate power over net income distribution.

The child poverty strategy was accompanied, at the consultation stage, by an 'evidence review' into the 'drivers of child poverty for families in poverty now and for poor children growing up to be poor adults'. This review, the only one published, provides a good example of the 'organising out' of certain issues. At the bottom of page 12, in the last paragraph of the Introduction, the following can be found:¹⁴

*This evidence review **only considers individual and family characteristics and events associated with current and future poverty. It does not take account of the macroeconomic context, in terms of the number and quality of available jobs or the returns to qualifications. This review also does not examine the impact of the institutional framework (eg, the current educational system) or culture of society. Nor does it consider the interaction between the benefits system and incentives to work, although this will obviously have a role in ensuring work pays.***

In scrutinising the decisions that have been made by the current government, however, we

are able to identify only some of the decisions that have not been made. In order to identify those issues which have remained completely off the political agenda, we must look for topics which 'have been suffocated before they have even been voiced'. Two such topics, by way of example, are wealth and the tax system.

Wealth

The proposal to link wealth with poverty is not a new one. In 1904, Joseph Rowntree suggested: 'Perhaps the greatest danger of our national life arises from the power of selfish and unscrupulous wealth.' More recently, Peter Townsend argued that 'the connections between the production of wealth and the production of poverty have to be made'.¹⁵ And yet, in an age of austerity and falling incomes, perhaps we need to 'rediscover' wealth, in the same way that poverty was 'rediscovered' over 50 years ago.

The Office for National Statistics recently published data on household wealth. It contains some very interesting information:¹⁶

- Aggregate total wealth of all private households in Great Britain is £9.5 trillion.
- The wealthiest 10 per cent of households own 44 per cent of total aggregate household wealth.
- The least wealthy half of households combined own 9 per cent of total aggregate household wealth.
- Private pension wealth is the largest component of aggregate total wealth.
- Half of all households have a total wealth of £218,400 or more.

The figures demonstrate that we live in an extremely rich country. They also highlight that we live in an extremely unequal country, one in which 'Britain's richest 1 per cent own as much as the poorest 55 per cent'.¹⁷ The total amount of wealth in the UK demonstrates that the financial resources potentially available to tackle poverty do not present a problem. What needs to be examined more closely is how this wealth is produced and distributed, especially at a time when poverty is predicted to rise and when the Chancellor has stated that 'Britain can no longer afford the welfare state'.¹⁸

Tax

In the same way that wealth rarely gets discussed in contemporary poverty debates, the tax system is rarely 'brought in'. The accountant and economist Richard Murphy pointed out in 2012 that at the same moment as the UK was

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facing the largest programme of cuts ever proposed (and, lest we forget, poverty levels predicted to increase), the country was also facing the 'biggest ever tax gap' in its history, the 'lowest number of staff ever employed by HMRC', the 'lowest headline and effective rates of corporation tax in its history', 'high levels of corporate tax avoidance' and 'significant errors in tax administration'.¹⁹ HMRC estimated the 'tax gap' in 2011/12 to be around £35 billion, up £1 billion from the previous year.²⁰ This is generally recognised to be a conservative estimate of the tax that is due but not paid and Murphy has argued previously that the 'real' gap is likely to be 'not less than £70 billion and might be as high as £120 billion'.²¹ Recent 'activity' around tackling tax evasion has been described by one commentator as a 'stunning confidence trick' and the rewriting of corporate tax laws actually results in 'state-endorsed tax avoidance'.²²

If we turn our attention to the tax that is paid, the picture is no more encouraging. Jonathan Bradshaw has argued that it needs to be recognised that 'the tax system is the element of the welfare state that is broken – if anything is'.²³ He highlights how the poorest 10 per cent of households are paying 35 per cent of their gross income in tax, compared with 34 per cent by the richest 10 per cent, and the situation is not improving. In a publication exploring the UK tax burden, Byrne and Ruane argued that:²⁴

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the top 10 per cent are not paying their fair share. Indirect taxes are regressive and this regressive character is not outweighed by direct taxes. Even among direct taxes, the only consistently progressive tax is income tax and here we see that income tax fails to 'keep pace' with the rising incomes of the top 10 per cent.

In short, then, a significant amount of tax that is due remains unpaid, depriving the government of much needed money, the tax system does little to redistribute the money that is paid in and, despite this being the age of austerity and everyone being 'in it together', the situation does not appear to be improving.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that focusing poverty policy initiatives on poor people can only take us so far. Peter Townsend noted that this approach might help us to address or alleviate some forms of poverty, but it would not explain how poverty was manufactured or what was generating it. He argued that a link must be made between how some people come to be very

wealthy in a country where others also happen to be very poor. Extending the scope of current anti-poverty debate to include consideration of wealth, the effectiveness of the tax system and other topics, such as the corporate welfare state and land ownership, might be beneficial. If this link can be made and then acted upon, we may, to paraphrase RH Tawney, in uncovering the 'problem of riches', stumble upon the solutions to the 'problem of poverty'. ■

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