

As the election recedes into the distance, the new government is setting about implementing its agenda, with the Queen's Speech delivered and first Budget of this parliament scheduled for early July. The agenda feels a familiar one. The Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill will see further freezing of benefit levels and a reduction in the level of the benefit cap. The Budget will include at least the first tranche of the promised £12 billion of social security cuts. The new HBAI figures, to be released just after *Poverty* goes to press, are set to show the first major uptick in child poverty since the commencement in earnest of the last round of benefit cuts.

With the outlook for the next few years ahead apparently bleak and getting bleaker, it is a timely moment to take stock of how we got to this point. Stewart Lansley and Joanna Mack set out how mass poverty in Britain today is the result of the economic gains since the 1980s bypassing the poorest. Britain, they note, stands in second place behind the United States in the low pay league of rich nations. While the 1997–2010 Labour government did much to tackle child poverty, the authors argue that it did so without tackling inequalities at source, leaving the social security system with a big job to do and progress vulnerable to reversal – as borne out by the actions of the 2010–2015 coalition government. They argue for an anti-poverty programme that tackles low pay; has higher rates of social investment, funded by progressive taxation; and reforms to social security that move away from residualisation.

As the new government floats the theme of 'one nation', Donald Hirsch takes a geographical perspective on poverty, asking how achieving a minimum acceptable standard of living varies across the UK. The UK, he concludes, remains relatively homogenous in its cost profiles, with the exception of London, where transport, rent and childcare add significantly to the level of income required. Both these features emphasise the relative nature of poverty, and the deep public understanding of poverty as a relative concept. That is a conversation that may need revisiting during the course of this parliament.

Finally, Lindsay Judge considers a sometimes neglected aspect of the growing working face of poverty, the 'hours question', subject of recent CPAG research. She argues that in-work poverty is a function of three variables: wage levels; the level of benefits to help with the costs of children; and the number of hours worked. In general, parents want to work – to provide for their families, but also for social interaction and to provide positive role models for their children. They understand that, for themselves and for other parents, a balance needs to be struck between time spent in paid work and time spent parenting. Policy interventions such as childcare support which help facilitate parental employment are therefore to be welcomed, but this must be in the context of choice. Parents involved in the research were clear that such choices should apply to all parents, including low earners.

We are in a period of rising child poverty. Children's benefits are likely to be cut further, while there is no end in sight to the UK's low wage epidemic. In this context, it seems that increasing hours of work will bear a bigger share of the burden of reducing child poverty in the years ahead. We need a debate on how desirable that is, and what the policy responses to that reality should be. Meanwhile, as Stuart Lansley and Joanna Mack argue, levels of poverty are ultimately the result of economic decisions taken on how growth is shared and opportunities spread across society. Their conclusion: other choices are possible. ■

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Poverty is the policy journal of the Child Poverty Action Group. It aims to carry articles and features that will inform, stimulate and develop the debate on the nature and causes of poverty in its various forms and on the action required, especially by governments, to relieve and ultimately prevent it. Our objective is to publish material that achieves a high standard of analysis, without sacrificing clarity or accessibility, to specialist and non-specialist alike.

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