

# CPAG: then, now and in the future

**As we approach another general election, Moussa Haddad considers the programme that must be put in place in order to eradicate child poverty by the end of the new government's term in 2020. He looks back to the early years of CPAG to find it contains striking parallels with the organisation's early campaigning demands, and discovers some familiar challenges on the way.**

## The more things change...

It is Friday 5 March 1965, and a group of academics, social workers and a few others from assorted professions are meeting at Toynbee Hall in London under the auspices of the Quakers' Social and Economic Affairs Committee. Motivated to get together to share their concerns about poverty in the UK, the event is to prove more than a talking shop. Harriett Wilson, the initiator of the meeting, had written to her hosts a month before, saying:<sup>1</sup>

*'I have been thinking if this is going to grow into an interest group... an organisation that might organise and encourage research, that might act as a lobby?'*

And indeed it did, because it was from this event that Child Poverty Action Group sprung.

Fast forward to spring 2015, and we approach a general election that is set to put in place the government that will take us through to 2020 – the year of the legal obligation to eradicate child poverty. Those who prefer happy endings may choose not to read on, because decisions made under the banner of austerity leave the picture on child poverty looking – in some ways – as discouraging as at any time in CPAG's history. Yet, while much has changed in the intervening fifty years, the need is as strong as ever for organisations like CPAG both to highlight problems and to help marshal optimism about what can be achieved to overcome them.

It is instructive at moments like this to reflect on the common challenges and the recurring

themes throughout our history – and, of course, the enduring overall goal. Looking back to its foundations, some of those present at that meeting in 1965 have noted that CPAG was very much a product of its time. But scrutiny of the origins of the organisation also shows that the issues which motivated its founders, their observations of how those living in poverty were treated at that time, and the theoretical and tactical questions the group had to address from its outset, are as resonant today as they were fifty years ago. Indeed, CPAG's history is as much a story of enduring themes and continued battles, as it is of progress, success and change.

## The rediscoveries of poverty

It was 1957 when Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously told the nation 'you've never had it so good'. For many, this was nothing but the truth. The great depression of the 1930s and wartime austerity were receding into distant memory, the economy was booming, and social mobility was on the increase. But against this ebullient backdrop, the promise implicit in the welfare state legislation of the 1940s, based on Beveridge – that the welfare state would protect us all from want – seemed, at least to some, to be at odds with the facts.

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the first ripples of rising academic and practitioner interest in the topic of poverty. Researchers had documented the lack of income and its effects on the lives of widows in East London,<sup>2</sup> for example, and on unmarried mothers.<sup>3</sup> Others had explored the economic circumstances of older people,<sup>4</sup> and assessed the continuing existence

**1972**  
*A Guide to National Welfare Benefits* is published by CPAG, kick-starting the UK welfare rights movement.

**1975**  
 CPAG publishes the first edition of *Poverty: the facts*, recording the causes, extent and nature of child poverty in the UK.

**1977**  
 CPAG plays a pivotal role in establishing child benefit as a universal payment for all families.

**1979**  
 CPAG's ground-breaking publication on the cost of a child receives widespread media coverage.

of malnutrition.<sup>5</sup> Through this work, some academics were challenging the prevailing reductionist accounts of poverty that centralised biology, 'immaturity', or 'problem families' as explanations, arguing instead that the condition needed to be seen much more as the product of poor administration and structural factors. In his seminal 1962 paper, 'The Meaning of Poverty', Peter Townsend challenged the notion that poverty and subsistence were the same. Instead, he asserted:<sup>6</sup>

*Poverty is a dynamic, not a static concept... [which] can only be defined in relation to the material and emotional resources available at a particular time to members either of a particular society or different societies.*

Thus was the notion of relative poverty put firmly on the social policy agenda.

Today, on the surface at least, many of those arguments have been won – or perhaps re-won. Successive prime ministers made their own declarations. In 1999, Tony Blair's pledge to end child poverty within a generation helped the country set out on a journey in which the UK led the OECD in poverty reduction over the ensuing decade. That decade ended under Gordon Brown, with all the major political parties giving not only moral support to the pledge, but voting to legislate to put it on a statutory footing through the 2010 Child Poverty Act. Crucially, the four targets underpinning the Act embraced Townsend's definition, embedding poverty as a relative, as well as a subsistence, concept. In 2006, the man who was to succeed Gordon Brown, David Cameron, declared:

*'I believe that poverty is an economic waste and a moral disgrace... I want this message to go out loud and clear: the Conservative Party recognises, will measure, and will act on relative poverty.'*

We had come full circle, but this time, commitment to a final victory over poverty seemed absolute.

And the 2000s really were a decade of progress. Child poverty fell by over a million. The effects were widespread: the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that poverty would have gone down on any line drawn between 43 per cent and 100 per cent of median income. It is instructive to consider what worked to reduce poverty in this period. Financial support for families with children, particularly through tax credits and child benefit, was an essential element. Helping more parents into paid work, through

in-work benefits, childcare support and employment services, led to the employment rate for lone parents increasing from 45 to 57 per cent, for mothers in couples from 68 to 71 per cent, and for fathers in couples from 88.7 to 89.4 per cent between 1997 and 2010. Childcare provision through free nursery places and support for a substantial proportion of costs through tax credits was valuable in its own right.

Sadly, just as this consensus around the importance of tackling child poverty was emerging in words, it was starting to be repudiated in deeds. Direct impacts of the economic crisis, particularly in the form of a squeeze on earnings, and fiscal decisions justified as a response to that crisis – notably real-terms cuts to a range of working-age and children's benefits – mean we face an impending poverty crisis. IFS projections suggest that, rather than poverty continuing to fall as we approach the 2020 target date, an extra 700,000 children will be in poverty compared to the latest figures. I will consider how the next government might respond to that, but first let us look at how our predecessors saw things in 1965.

**Why did poverty still exist? Why does poverty still exist?**

From the outset, CPAG was an organisation that believed that evidence mattered: understanding and explaining why poverty still existed was a critical part of its mission. By pooling their expertise, the group identified three key reasons why the welfare state had not abolished 'want' as Beveridge had envisaged.

The first explanation advanced was that a substantial minority of families who were eligible for national assistance did not claim the support for which they qualified. As many at the March meeting were aware, putting oneself through the means test – the gateway to national assistance – smacked of the 1930s, and was seen by many as shaming and to be avoided. Moreover, low take-up was also compounded by a lack of knowledge about entitlement: if families were unaware of their right to support, they simply could not claim it.

In contrast, take-up was almost total for family allowance, the universal benefit offered to all families with dependent children. Yet the second explanation, stemming from analysis by members of the group, was that its value was compromised in two key ways. First, family allowance had not kept pace with inflation since its introduction in 1946, and, second, it was only available for second and subsequent children. While it did offer some help with the cost

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**1985**  
Following pressure from CPAG, family credit is paid to mothers, rather than through wage packets.

**1986**  
CPAG wins a legal test case in the European Court of Justice. For the first time married women can claim invalid care allowance increases.

**1987**  
CPAG campaigns against the introduction of the poll tax, which is finally replaced by a fairer council tax system in 1993.

**1988**  
As a new benefits system is introduced, CPAG becomes the leading source of advice and information on social security.

of children, then, it did not go far enough to stave off poverty for those on low incomes. Then, as now, this effect was particularly felt by larger families, who were consequently exposed to a higher risk of poverty.

The third shortcoming of the social security system that the group identified was the wage stop. In much the same way as the benefit cap operates today, the wage stop restricted the amount paid to unemployed men by reference to wage levels, top-slicing their entitlement regardless of their families' needs. While many forms of exceptional payment could supplement incomes, these were discretionary and provided no guaranteed source of poverty prevention.

This critique underpinned the group's earliest political programme: to point out the perversities of means-tested benefits while also advocating for higher take-up; to advocate for the value of family allowances to be raised; and to campaign against the hated wage stop. The parallels with CPAG's agenda today are surely hard to avoid.

**Agenda 2015 to 2020**

Today, we are approaching another crossroads on child poverty, even if no-one has put up the signposts yet. The 2020 targets are in a strange limbo – publicly endorsed by all players, and with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, telling the BBC in March 2014 that they will be met – yet with respected independent experts saying they will be missed. In September, the IFS said:

*It still does not seem possible that the targets set out in the 2010 Child Poverty Act could be achieved under current policy or any other plausible scenarios for how the UK economy and tax and benefit policy will develop over the remainder of this decade.*

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, set up to monitor the government's progress on reducing child poverty, declared in October that 'without radical changes to the tax and benefit system to boost the incomes of poor families, there is no realistic hope of the statutory child poverty targets being met in 2020', and called for a revised timescale for achieving them.

Under the banner of austerity, we have seen five years of missed opportunities and of progress undone. It is crucial, however, not to give up on the goal of ending child poverty, even if the 2020 deadline is looking increasingly unlikely to be met. With that in mind, CPAG will be publishing,

ahead of the general election, a manifesto for the coming Parliament. We live in an imperfect world, and must acknowledge that, with the election set to be contested under a backdrop of commitment to continued austerity, progress may not be as rapid as we would wish. Bearing in mind that note of realism, what kind of things will be in the in-tray of the next government?

In the first hundred days of the new government, it is vital that whoever is in charge makes ending child poverty a national social and economic policy priority. We know well of the social costs of child poverty, and of the moral imperative to prevent children growing up poor, but the incoming government should recognise, too, that child poverty imposes an economic cost of £29 billion or more a year,<sup>7</sup> and avoid making false economies.

Given the damage done by cuts to children's benefits, it should commit, as a first step, to restoring the value of child benefit, cut by 14 per cent in real terms over the current Parliament, by 2020. More broadly, we need to see the government undo the damage done by uprating decisions in this Parliament, in much the same way that the triple-lock (uprating by the highest of inflation, earnings growth and 2.5 per cent) has helped to protect and gradually restore the incomes of pensioners. Parents must also be protected from the impact of the increasing costs of child-related spending, with CPAG's *Cost of a Child* research showing the costs of raising a child growing at a significantly faster rate over the last two years than parents' incomes.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond this, in its first year, the government must seek to reform universal credit to improve its poverty-fighting potential, and strengthen its work incentives to working parents, especially for lone parents and second earners. We know that increased parental employment was a significant part of the fall in poverty over the last decade, and the universal credit budget has been repeatedly raided – for example, through the freezing of work allowances on two occasions – in ways that reduce work incentives. The child element of the benefit also plays a role for parents both in and out of work in helping to meet the additional costs of children. Thus, a strengthened universal credit (and, in the interim, legacy benefits such as jobseeker's allowance and tax credits) is an essential part of the poverty-fighting toolkit. Ensuring the social security system functions effectively is of equal importance, with research such as that published by CPAG and partners in November showing that the demand for food banks is being stoked to a significant degree by delays

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1991

After a long campaign to save child benefit led by CPAG, John Major's government pledges to increase child benefit in line with inflation.

1997

CPAG buys its first building thanks to a legacy. Its purpose-built training suite offers courses for hundreds of advisers each year.

1999

The Scottish Parliament is established. CPAG in Scotland opens its doors, growing from one member of staff to 16 in 15 years.

1999

Tony Blair pledges to end child poverty by 2020.

and errors in Department for Work and Pensions decision making, and through punitive fixed-length sanctions.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, the next government has an opportunity to set us back on the right track with regard to child poverty. Over the course of the coming Parliament, whoever forms the government must develop, fund, and start implementing a long-term plan to end child poverty, with clear milestones, targets and dates – everything, alas, that is lacking in the most recent child poverty strategy. Sitting alongside that, we desperately need an ambitious strategy for high quality childcare, to help fill in one of the gaps in the welfare state.

We have the rhetorical commitment of all the parties to ending child poverty, alongside public anxiety about poverty being at an all-time high.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the result in May, this could and should be an opportunity for a genuinely forward-looking, cross-party approach to tackling what remains one of the most important and damaging failures in our society.

### The next fifty years?

While we fervently hope that our centenary will be marked quietly by a society grown accustomed to a land without poverty, that is a moment that will need fighting for for a little while yet. In the meantime, many issues will keep rearing their heads, with battles re-fought and won – for example, the re-emergence of a debate around poverty measurement that seemed comprehensively won fifty years ago. The agenda of CPAG today bears many similarities to that of yesteryear, arguing among other things for improved levels of children's benefits, and using our expertise to advocate for improved social security and parental employment. In many cases, the names may have changed, and the battles to be fought on any given day may vary, but the mix of policy interventions would be familiar to those who set up CPAG all those years ago.

One finding from the research of fifty years ago is illuminating:<sup>11</sup>

*Possibly the most novel finding [of our study] is the extent of poverty among children. For over a decade it has generally been assumed that such poverty as exists is found overwhelmingly among the aged... Quantitatively, the problem of poverty among children is more than two-thirds the size of poverty among the aged. This fact has not been given due emphasis in the policies of the political parties.*

Today, the situation is reversed, and child poverty is far higher than pensioner poverty, which has been steadily reduced. To us, this shows what can be achieved through policy. Perhaps the key ingredient to add to the mix is political will. CPAG's role will continue to be providing evidence, helping to show what works, but also helping to forge that will. ■

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- 3 V Wimperis, *The Unmarried Mother and her Child*, Allen and Unwin, 1960
- 4 P Townsend, *The Family Life of Old People*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957
- 5 R Lambert, *Nutrition in Britain, 1950-1960*, Occasional Papers on Social Administration, No. 6, G Bell, 1964
- 6 P Townsend, 'The Meaning of Poverty', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol 13, No. 3, 1962
- 7 [www.cpag.org.uk/content/estimate-cost-child-poverty-2013](http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/estimate-cost-child-poverty-2013)
- 8 CPAG, *The Cost of a Child in 2014*, August 2014
- 9 J Perry and others, *Emergency Use Only: understanding and reducing the need for food banks in the UK*, Oxfam GB, November 2014
- 10 See Ben Page, Chief Executive, Ipsos MORI, 'Public says decent jobs are the best way to reduce poverty', Joseph Rowntree Foundation blog, 6 November 2014: 'During 2014, we have seen record levels of anxiety over poverty – the highest we have recorded in 40 years of surveys.'
- 11 B Abel-Smith and P Townsend, *The Poor and the Poorest*, G Bell, 1965

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