

Lecture for CPAG NZ
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This is a great treat for me – to be as outspoken as I like, here I am on the other side of the world, and so I can be a bit more reckless, a bit more dangerous than usual in terms of what I say. What's more, I get to mouth off to you about what I'd be doing in your shoes, without actually having a clue if it's right for your circumstances – power without responsibility - that's a great treat too. But of course I do know from conversations that I've had with many of you here, not just on this visit but over the past few years, that in fact we face so many similar situations and challenges - and so best of all for me in being here is that we can compare notes and experiences and learn from one another, and I'm really delighted to have that chance today.

Overall, to try to shape that conversation between us, I want to start by giving you a picture of what's been going on in the UK in terms of anti poverty policy over the past 10 years or so – since it's obviously been a really interesting and quite fruitful time for us, child poverty has fallen substantially under our labour government, though with so much more to do. But also very interesting, on my way here, I stopped off for a few days in Australia, a really fascinating time to visit, with the opportunities that are presented by the election of a new government there. And looking at our three countries, and where we each are along the political spectrum, watching us copy from each other – the good bits but also the bad ideas, the avoidable mistakes - that has made me really think quite carefully about a whole host of questions for us as advocacy bodies - how to play the short term opportunity to secure what you can and stay inside the loop against the challenge of holding a position of principle for the longterm; how to make the most of it when you're in political favour - and the risks as well as the benefits of that; and what you do when you're not in favour and the agenda is very much against you, what then counts as success .

Today I'm going to try to answer those questions along three dimensions that seem to me to be of fundamental importance, the 3 P's I'm calling them: politics, policy and the public, why they're each important, and the opportunities and challenges they create.

But first a little bit of UK history to get you in the picture of where it is that we are, and how our recent experience has shaped the analysis that I'll put before you now. You probably know the basics –the 1980s and early 90s saw child poverty in Britain more than double, so that by 1999 we had the worst rate of any country in Europe, with 4.2 million of our children, 1 in 3, growing up poor. Then the election of a new labour government in 1997, swept into power on a landslide of public support for an agenda of greater equality and social justice. That government, now in its third term and under its second prime minister, has implemented a policy programme that has undoubtedly reduced child poverty substantially. But still progress has been limited, we've moved up, but not by much, now 4th worst in the EU, still 30% of our children grow up in poverty. And the most recent figures, for 2005-06, actually showed for the first time since 1999 that the position was getting worse.

Of course it would be unfair to paint too gloomy a picture, the fall in child poverty under new labour has to be recognised as a very real and admirable achievement by the government, it didn't happen by accident, and what's also important is that it has

I think really quite fundamentally changed the basis of debate, creating an expectation on any future government that child poverty must remain centre stage. So the first “P”, the politics, have been a very significant factor in getting us to where we’ve reached today. Fifteen years ago, the then conservative minister for social security denied the existence of poverty in Britain at all. Today, new Labour’s sustained commitment to the child poverty agenda has forced all the main political parties onto this territory, all now are committed at least to the aspiration to end child poverty for ever, and indeed in terms of the second “P” – the policy solutions - there is much – in my view rather alarmingly too much – consensus between them about how that can be done.

So I’d start by paying tribute to the UK Labour government, for the boldness of the ambition that they set themselves, their willingness to be judged on their achievements, and the policy agenda that supported the reduction in child poverty that we’ve seen. Hugely, fundamentally, important of course was that Labour publicly set itself a target. In 1999 the then PM Tony Blair pledged to end child poverty within a generation, by the year 2020, and this bold and visionary ambition was quickly followed with a set of milestones to measure progress towards that target, first to reduce child poverty by a quarter by 2004/05 and by half by 2010. And important too was the clear restatement that child poverty would be measured on a range of measures, but that most attention would be given to a relative poverty measure set at 60% of median income, that as living standards rose across society it would not be acceptable for our poorest children to be left behind.

Now I think in the UK we have come to take all that for granted, that of course we’ll have a target and of course it will be a relative measure that we’ll focus attention on. But we should beware complacency - for we remember that Oz too once had a child poverty target, under Bob Hawke, quickly abandoned by the Howard administration (it will be interesting to see if Mr Rudd will be willing to adopt it once again). And we should also note that a number of countries have adopted a less demanding measure of relative poverty than is the case in much of Europe, and sometimes to the point of outright refusal to recognise a relative poverty measure at all.

So I certainly think that we need to be watchful. But equally the lesson from the UK is that we can see the political power of setting a target as a benchmark for measuring progress, and that can be useful both internally and internationally - ambitious targets to end child poverty not only benefit children in the countries that make that commitment, but they allow for comparison between nations, driving up the standard, raising the game for every country, right across the globe. Our child poverty targets have certainly forced the UK government to invest more in their achievement – our budget last month for example saw an extra £1bn in financial support for families as Ministers struggled to get things back on track. And the weight of international reputation is also important – for us that was clear just last year, when the publication of the Unicef report card on child wellbeing showed the UK 21st out of 21 countries, shocking both public and political opinion, and sparking much debate.

So targets and comparisons have certainly been a fundamental component of what has been achieved in the UK to date. They’ve given us as campaigners a stick with which to beat government, but also the space to recognise and acknowledge their achievements too. But that’s of course a difficult balance to keep on getting right – and sometimes I feel I swither between crawling sycophant and screeching harpy in my dealings with our government - though that does at least does retain for us the advantage of surprise. But we have to be careful sometimes to resist the risk that we get too cosy, greet small gains too enthusiastically, settling for too little as a result. And we’ve also learned that a government which is committed to ending child poverty

can be remarkably defensive and very very threatening when things are going badly and it feels it's being criticised, and at times we've needed every ounce of courage to face down ministerial threats to cast us into outer darkness if we won't back down.

So I suppose I'd regard our lobbying as somewhere between who blinks first negotiation and long and tetchy marriage, both sides need to keep talking, and - not always easy for either of us this one – both need to act grownup. The importance for us of the child poverty target in this context is that vitally it has given us a common shared goal with the politicians, the space and opportunity for constructive dialogue between us, for ongoing discussion of the policy options, for us to press for further improvements, for policy makers to test their thinking, identify the pitfalls, and, I would argue strongly, for better policy solutions to emerge as a result.

But against that positive backdrop it is arguably at least in some ways more challenging for us to deal with a government publicly and specifically committed to ending child poverty than one where the nature of our opposition was very much more clear cut. In the 80s and early 90s when child poverty was rising rapidly and Ministers were in denial, CPAG's task was a simple and straightforward one –to resist, oppose in public, while privately seeking to limit the worst excesses of policy to minimise as far as we could the damage that could be done. And in practice through private and often quite close relationships with Conservative ministers, who at the very least respected our expertise and knowledge, we were able to do quite a lot of that – although we'd have to say the overall picture was one of ultimate failure as child poverty increased.

Under new Labour however the challenge has been different, and sometimes very testing indeed. Here is where the politics begin to blend into the second "P", the policy agenda, where we might support the intent but have problems with the means. How supportive should we be for example when the general thrust of policy has been positive, yet when the NGO sector's independence is often compromised as we are increasingly drawn into the "project" – sometimes, indeed frequently, even delivering the policy programme for government, actually providing the public services we've advocated for? Have we got the balance right between encouragement and exhortation, and criticism and blame? Are we radical and visionary enough in our demands, or is just that we're being sensibly realistic – what's the balance there? And are we too much allowing the government to set the agenda, a non stop welter of new initiatives, perhaps quite deliberately produced to divert our energies from dictating what we'd see as the agenda, and which leave us responding, reacting, too much on the back foot?

All of that is not to deny that recent policy initiatives in the UK have often been positive and important in bringing child poverty down. Indeed I'd have to argue that Labour in government - whether by luck or judgment - has followed what can be seen as a remarkably coherent policy agenda overall. Underpinned by its philosophy of "work for those who can, support for those who cannot", we've seen significant extra investment to increase family incomes, investment in the so-called New Deal programmes to get people back to work, a range of measures to make work possible and make work pay including a National Minimum Wage introduced for the first time in 1999, new rights at work: better maternity pay and leave, the right for parents to request flexible working arrangements, investment in improving skills, massive investment in education, childcare and early years provision to improve children's life chances - these are the policies that have in practice made the difference, have brought about the reduction in child poverty that we have seen to date.

But we do have to face some worries about the thrust, speed and direction of the policy programme now. A baffling range of policy agendas and mantras are flooding out of government – balancing rights and responsibilities; reducing inequality and improving social mobility; employment as the best, sometimes it seems like the only, route out of poverty; the politics of opportunity and aspiration (a great political favourite that one) ; securing children's wellbeing in the here and now of childhood, while improving their future life chances because allowing kids to grow up poor is a waste of future potential and costs the country dear - the business case for ending poverty if you like. All of these different agendas come in and out of fashion, overlap – and clash. And against that busy backdrop, where we as lobby groups have fallen short is that we have not been bold enough in asserting our clear messages: about the absolute imperative of ending poverty and securing children's happiness and wellbeing; we have given insufficient attention to the autonomy, the individual rights of poor people, and we have too often allowed the government to use ends to justify means.

Looking first at the policy agenda, what we can see in the UK I guess is a twin track strategy followed by new Labour, to maximise family incomes through - often sotto voce – redistribution, alongside an agenda framed around work as the best route out of poverty for most families –something with which CPAG agrees. The way that has been played out in policy and practice has been at best, however, mixed. So Labour's approach to maximising family incomes focussed first on the new tax credits – a seamless system of financial support for families with children, following Gordon Brown's famous model of “progressive universalism”, that almost everyone gets something but the poorest families would get most. The Child Tax Credit, paid to families with children, sharply means tested, but stretching quite far up the income scale, available to parents in or out of work, has been I think really important in increasing the incomes of the poorest families, an important component of the fall in child poverty that we've seen to date. And separately, the working tax credit, for low paid adults in employment, has also been important - though not without its administrative problems – complexity and uncertainty, errors and confusion about entitlement, often swingeing clawbacks of overpayments, and sharp deduction rates as parents increase earnings from paid work, all have limited the effectiveness of tax credits in reducing child poverty as had been hoped.

It's therefore been very pleasing to see our government beginning to recognise once again the role that non means tested universal child benefit can play in offering a stable platform to low income families, as an anti poverty tool. Child Benefit - CPAG's favourite benefit, usually paid to the mother, dead simple, well understood, follows the child, remains in payment whatever the family structure, whether parents move in or out of work – and undoubtedly one of our most popular benefits, no stigma, with very high take-up, something like 98% of families entitled to it are in receipt of Child Benefit today. Universal Child Benefit has been more effective at reaching the poorest families than any of the targeted benefits specifically designed to reach them, and so we were delighted when the Chancellor in his budget last month brought forward additional investment in Child Benefit. At a time when ministers are worried about how they'll meet their child poverty target, it's nice to see them finally realise that child benefit can be relied on to come up with the goods.

So increasing family incomes through the benefits and tax credits system has been a vital – indeed the main - factor in bringing down child poverty as we've seen. But in truth the government's long-term strategy is much more focused on the other half of the equation, increasing incomes from paid work. And here, despite great efforts which have resulted in the highest employment rate we've ever known, the picture is even less encouraging, even more worrying, very much more mixed. A range of

reforms and requirements on parents to be available for work or face penalties mean that many feel increasingly pressured to take unsuitable unsustainable jobs. Disadvantage and discrimination in the labour market continue – disabled people, women, and those from minority backgrounds continue to be less likely to be in employment, and to earn less when they are in work. In the world of rights and responsibilities, it's always the individual who has the responsibility – imposing greater requirements on employers, to offer good jobs with flexible conditions and decent rates of pay, is steadfastly resisted by a government which sees economic competitiveness as threatened by improving the rights of parents at work. Increasing childcare provision has often seemed more focused on the need to get parents into the workplace than in terms of an enriching experience for the child. And the result of this emphasis on work first, work as a route out of poverty, has been less than a resounding success in terms of reducing child poverty—today in the UK around half of children growing up in poverty are doing so where at least one adult in the household is in paid work. Meantime a harsher regime of conditions and requirements to be available for work or face benefits sanctions has borne particularly harshly on the most disadvantaged, those furthest from the labour market, the most socially excluded, with the lowest level of qualifications or skills.

And lately this agenda has been accelerating as Ministers panic that their targets still look out of reach. Now we have new demands on the long-term sick and disabled to participate in work preparation activity or lose benefits, to undergo a much more demanding test of capacity for work, and a new benefit that for many will be at a rate lower than was previously the case. Lone parents, previously required to be available for work when their youngest child reached 16, are from this November to be available for work when their child reaches the age of 12, reducing to age 7 by 2010, and they too will be switched onto a different benefit with the threat of larger reductions in the amount they receive for non compliance than is currently the case. One minister recently even went so far as to talk of withdrawing access to public housing or help with housing costs from those who don't make themselves available for work.

The fashionable language now is of a “contract” between the state, families and delivery agencies, but it's not a very equal bargaining relationship, especially when our independent advice and advocacy sector faces an increasing funding squeeze. And all this is being implemented through a model, and indeed a language of so called “welfare” provision that borrows heavily from the US and Oz, countries where child poverty has been rising not falling, – largely privatised, providers rewarded for the achievement of outcomes that translate into benefits savings for government, and operating a system that's increasingly based on discretionary decisions rather than entitlements – with much greater risk of discrimination –while at the same time weakening the independent advocacy role of the NGO sector by drawing them right into the welfare provision landscape, so that their ability to advise their clients is compromised by their need for commercial gain.

Indeed in reforming our welfare, our social security system, the UK's Labour government has been remarkably casual about process – leading in practice to a system that is increasingly discriminatory, discretionary, lacking in transparency, over complex, without proper systems for appeal or redress when things go wrong, targeted rather than universalised, with the stigma and risk of lower take up that result.

All of this is highly concerning – and surprisingly little debated. In effect it sets up a divide between the so-called deserving and undeserving poor, it weakens notions of mutuality and interdependence, imposes a different and more onerous set of social

obligations on those experiencing poverty and reliant on state support from those who are not, and seriously undermines a social welfare system in which everyone has a stake as of right. The result is an agenda that has predominantly moved away from the concept of universalism in favour of targeted (though by no means always effective) policy solutions; an agenda that suffers from lack of clarity and muddled thinking: stigmatising “dependency” as a concept, stressing individual autonomy, then seeking to “impose” that autonomy through a compulsory participation regime. It’s an agenda that makes much of the benefits of personalised and tailor made support for individuals, which can of course be useful, but with risks of inconsistent, discriminatory or unreasonable treatment, and weakening individual rights. And very damagingly, it is an agenda that condemns our social security system as a “passive” system, failing to recognise its role in actively preventing poverty, missing the point that reducing social security simply to a safety net is a sign not of success, but of a system that has failed.

Now it’s vital therefore that we reassert the need for basic security of income as a prerequisite for ending poverty and for families to move forward to improve their economic prospects, getting your head above water first before you can think of looking for work. For most damningly, and despite investment in family incomes through tax credits, the consequence of the kind of thinking I have been describing is that it has left us overall with an agenda that has denied the right to an adequate income for every family that surely a government committed to the eradication of child poverty should have right at its heart.

But it’s not just the policy - the language has become more hardline too. Politicians have lined up to talk tough about scroungers, cheats, the work-shy; bad behaviour, poor parenting and lack of individual aspiration are increasingly presented as the explanation for our continuing high rate of child poverty and the failure to reduce inequality at all. Our main political parties have been engaged in an “arms race”, a race to the bottom, each trying to out-tough the other, not just in language but kiteflying tougher policy solutions too – careless of our Conservative party, anxious to demonstrate their new social justice credentials, downright reckless and irresponsible of Labour, fighting in an arms race they cannot ever win. Lately I’m glad to say we have seen Ministers row back from some of that harsher language, but overall the impact has been disastrous in terms of maintaining public support for anti poverty policy, bringing me to the final “P” – public attitudes - that I want to discuss today.

For us in the UK, looking back at the last 10 years, for us as activists, it’s securing and sustaining public support for an antipoverty agenda that has been the greatest challenge, and perhaps the one where I’d admit that we have done least well. New Labour was elected in 1997 on a tide of public enthusiasm in favour of greater social justice, equality, and opportunity for all. Today, a decade later, research into public attitudes by the Fabian Society, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the government’s own DWP all point to a public that is exceptionally sceptical about the existence of poverty in 21st century Britain, and where it does acknowledge its existence it’s seen as the fault of poor parenting, bad choices, profligacy and fecklessness, with families reliant on state support too often characterised as idle, scroungers, cheats.

Now I am quite sure that our politicians have - intentionally or otherwise – fuelled these attitudes with tough talk and tough policies, and with their habitual downplaying of the rights of the poor. But I also have to acknowledge the failure of the NGO sector, the campaign organisations, to stem, let alone turn, that tide. Yes we tried, a bit, but not if I’m honest as quickly and as wholeheartedly as we needed to. Back in

2000, a number of our children's charities, including CPAG, did come together to try to forge a coalition to campaign to end child poverty for good. And finally, 8 long and hard years later we are at last getting the campaign together - but almost, though I hope not, as it gets too late. To be sure, we can make many excuses for why we found it so hard to campaign together to capture public support – a hostile media, a complicated message (poverty in a rich country is not after all like poverty in the developing world), a problem that's "in the face" of a public who fear they'll find themselves living next door to the problem families, in the run down neighbourhoods, it's all too close to home - and now an economic downturn that means middle income households become more protective of their own interests as they feel times getting tough. But if those are fair excuses, it's also true that we didn't readily as a sector display the courage and the willingness to sacrifice our own organisational ambitions and priorities to build a wide consensus, and we have lost, sacrificed public support as a result.

You might say that hasn't mattered, our government has carried on regardless, the antipoverty agenda continued, child poverty has come down. And up to a point that has been true – at least while times were good. But last year we began to see things slip a little -as both economic and political pressures bore in on the government, in a choice between tax breaks for the rich and more money for poorer families, it was the rich that came out best. So first last March we saw a too-clever budget, introducing a reduced basic tax rate to appeal to middle income voters, but quickly exposed for the sleight of hand it was. Then in October, money that we might have hoped had been earmarked for measures to reduce child poverty was suddenly switched overnight to reductions in inheritance tax – incurred by only a tiny proportion of the population, but when the opposition began to enjoy political success with their populist talk of a "death tax", political principle went out of the window for new Labour in their scramble to buy back public support.

The positive consequence of all that however is that we in the campaign to End Child Poverty have taken that as a wakeup call, got our act together, begun to campaign on a set of clear and unified messages - and last month's budget was a real victory for proactive public campaigning as child poverty took the lion's share of public investment once again.

But now we need to keep that pressure going, and to go much further too - asserting the bold and radical messages about how to end child poverty and articulating our vision – demanding an end to inequality and discrimination, fighting for a universal system of entitlement that ensures an adequate income for every family whether parents are in or out of work, showing to society that poverty costs every one of us, damages everyone, and insisting on the right of every child not to grow up poor. For it is only when we are at our most challenging, our most demanding, our most insistent, and our most united, that we will truly make the difference, enthuse the public, pressure the politicians, and secure and sustain the investment needed to bring about that ambitious, admirable and entirely achievable goal : to end child poverty in rich countries, for every child, for good.