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5

'What have the Romans ever done for us?'

Child Poverty and the Legacy of 'New' Labour

Danny Dorling

My first child was born during Tony Blair's first term of office, my second during his second, and my third during his third (and final) term. Tony himself was born in the same year as Mrs Thatcher's twins. His generation, and (much later) mine, was the generation of Thatcher's children. His, and 'New' Labour's legacy, were Thatcher's grandchildren.

In 2010 'New' Labour won no fourth term in office, but neither did the Conservatives win outright power. Many people wanted an end to the Thatcherism that had come to characterize 'New' Labour (Dorling 2010a), but they had no serious alternative to turn to. What they got in 2010 with the coalition could be seen partly as a continuation of a trend set in place during 1979, and not much altered during the 13 years of New Labour rule from 1997. In 2010 it was claimed that when the electorate were:

> Invited to embrace five more years of a Labour government, and of Gordon Brown as Prime Minister, it [was] hard to feel enthusiasm. [And that] Labour's kneejerk critics can sometimes sound like the Monty Python's People's Front of Judea asking what the Romans have ever done for us. The salvation of the health service, major renovation of schools, the minimum wage, civil partnerships and the extension of protection for minority groups are heroic, not small, achievements. (*Guardian*, 30 April 2010)

But just how heroic had 'New' Labour really been, especially when it came to child poverty? When that editorial in the *Guardian* newspaper was published, during the onset of the British General Election in 2010, I suspected I might be one of these designated 'kneejerk critics'. I had kept quiet during that election campaign. Thatcher's election itself, in 1979, had been aided (some thought) by critics of 'Old' Labour back in the late 1970s (the 'pink professors'). But what I want to argue here is that the key and oft reiterated central undertaking made by the 1997–2010 'New' Labour administration that governed Britain in the early years of the twenty-first century was not honoured. This undertaking had been announced by Prime Minister Tony Blair in the annual Beveridge lecture of 1999: being poor, he said, 'should not be a life sentence': it was a '20 year mission – but I believe it can be done' (BBC News 1999).

Blair's pledge to end child poverty was reaffirmed by his successor Gordon Brown at the Labour Party conference of 2008:

> Brown acknowledged that economic times were 'tough' but said the government was 'in it for the long haul', set to achieve the complete elimination of child poverty by 2020. He also promised to continue record investment in Sure Start (the government's pre-school programme, begun in 1998) and introduce free nursery education for two-year-olds in up to 60 areas. He said: 'For me, the fairer future starts with

> putting children first – with the biggest investment in children this country has ever seen. It means delivering the best possible starts in life with services tailored to the needs of every single precious child .... (Ahmed 2008)

Once the 'New' Labour government had departed the political stage, it was possible to make a more sober appraisal of the 'Blair years' in relation to state of the nation's children. Here I concentrate on statistics that cover the period 1997 to 2005. During those years the proportion of children living in a family that could not afford to take a holiday away from home had risen; so had the number (and proportion) of children whose parents could not afford to let them have friends round for tea; likewise the number of children who were too poor to pursue a hobby and the number of children living in single-parent families without access to a car. All these statistics first came to light in preliminary work on child poverty undertaken in national surveys and revealed in 2010 (Dorling 2010b). Today that work is largely complete, as part of the massive recent ESRC-funded project 'Poverty and Social Exclusion', and the results can be viewed in detail at: www.poverty.ac.uk/.

This chapter offers an alternative assessment of 'New' Labour's record on child poverty to that story of relative success which some on the centre-left like to believe. It argues that 'New' Labour travelled in the very direction it had specifically promised not to travel. In his Beveridge lecture, Blair had said: 'In Beveridge's time the welfare state was associated with progress and advancement. Today it is often associated with dependency, fraud, abuse, laziness. I want to make it once again a force for progress' (BBC, 1999). It is important to remember that it was Tony Blair, not David Cameron, who said those words.

In office, 'New' Labour pursued a populist and punitive approach, happy to label benefit claimants as feckless and to regard taxation as the Victorians had done – as similar to giving to charity,

something one did for the poor. One life-long Labour supporter explained in 2013 that there had been doubts all along: 'Blair had not been leader long when I was told by a distinguished and dedicated Labour MP: "The trouble with Tony is that he's a Tory"' (Flintoff 2013). That Labour MP thought that those who were not Tories in the party would be able to control Tony and his group. They were wrong.

The real militant tendency had come into Labour from the right, not the left, and on poverty 'New' Labour peddled myths that the poor were lazier than the rich; they introduced 'no fifth option', and rhetoric of being 'tough on the causes', of teaching 'money management', having 'fraud crackdowns', and 'benefit squeezes', especially for those 'feckless' adults without children. And in doing all this they propagated five myths:

- Myth 1: 'They' are lazy and just don't want to work.
- Myth 2: 'They' are addicted to drink and drugs.
- Myth 3: 'They' are not really poor – they just don't manage their money properly.
- Myth 4: 'They' are on the fiddle.
- Myth 5: 'They' have an easy life on benefits.

The Coalition government that came to power in 2010 took this language on gladly, and added a myth of this own (The Churches 2013):

- Myth 6: 'They' caused the deficit.

The Coalition claimed that the poor in Britain, children as well as adults, and especially families that contained 'more children than they could afford', did not deserve what they had. The Coalition government of 2010 began almost immediately upon taking office to single out this group of the poor, and to suggest that partly through 'New' Labour's support for them, and partly through their own indolence, it was these people who had brought down the

nation's economy. 'New' Labour had created the environment that made such arguments believable.

By extending 'New' Labour's rhetoric the Coalition government began, quite successfully, to increase hatred for the poor. They did this to try to justify cutting benefits, moving poorer families out of London and other places where the rich wanted more of the housing. Because they talked of still caring, in the way (and using the language) that 'New' Labour had talked of caring, and in the way a charity worker might talk of caring, much of the electorate did not notice the ground shifting. That shift had begun with Thatcher. It was not continuous, but more often than not, even under Labour, it continued to move the centre-ground towards the right long after she had left office.

The 'New' Labour Government had made some significant achievements for children. It greatly reduced the numbers living in the very worst of poverty. It both improved education chances and narrowed education divides and it governed over a period when young people's chances of gaining a job improved greatly, especially in the poorest areas, and national youth suicide rates fell quickly (in contrast to the previous Conservative administration, and subsequent period). However, when it came to assessing their legacy as regards inequality overall and the access to income and wealth enjoyed by different groups of children in the UK, 'New' Labour's record was poor. As the exhaustive Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) survey recently found, by 2012, 'More children lead impoverished and restricted lives today than in 1999' (Gordon et al. 2013).

'New' Labour also paved the way, on so many fronts, for some of the worst policy decisions of the next government. 'New' Labour introduced student tuition fees, which the next government could increase to £9,000 a year (making them the most expensive in Europe). 'New' Labour began the privatisation of the National Health Service, which the next government could then expand

upon. And they allowed life-chances between young adults to diverge rapidly, which is why the young parents of today are bringing their children up in such widely differing circumstances. Above all else, it is that increase in inequality which makes it easier now for people in Britain *not* to see others' children as like theirs.

An heroic Labour government from 1997 to 2010 would have achieved so much more. It would have been heroic to have reduced income and wealth inequalities. By doing so, 'New' Labour could have reduced both the rates of real poverty, and the waste, pollution and excesses of the rich. It would have been heroic to have refused to take part in America's wars, as Labour refused to do when in power from 1964 to 1970. It is possible to look back at every progressive government elected to power in Britain before 1979 and find evidence of heroism. In contrast, 'New' Labour excelled only at fighting and 'losing small wars' (Ledwidge 2011). It may have been 'New' Labour's military escapades that most diverted the attention of those in that party who could have salvaged its progressive credentials when it was in office. Had so many eyes not been turned towards Iraq during 'New' Labour's second term in office, more people in that party might have spotted the war on poverty faltering at home. The cost of the war in Iraq also reduced the resources that could have been spent within the UK.

But it was not just in fighting expensive and harmful overseas wars that the last Labour government squandered its chance to leave office with most ordinary people better off than when it had gained power. It would have been heroic to have reined in the bankers before the crash. In comparison with contemporary governments in other countries, and with progressive politics in Britain's past, and with the 1997 dream that 'things can only get better', 'New' Labour fell far short.

Here is what Julian Baggini had to say on Labour's record in office in that same issue of the *Guardian* that the comment on Romans was made:

> I think this has been an under-appreciated government. The last 13 years have been immeasurably better than the previous 18, and the return to Conservatism, in its current shape at least, appals me. But the game is up, both for a system which protects two parties which most people do not support, and a government that just cannot now hope to be re-elected with a majority. (Baggini 2010)

What do we find when, instead of announcing 'immeasurably better', we actually measure? Below, I'll list a few attempts to measure this allegedly immeasurable betterment. These attempts were from those first surveys which became available in 2010, and I include them here to show that it was even possible during the last year of Labour's period in power to tell that the wrong trajectory was being taken. What has happened since, under the Coalition, has accelerated the growing gaps between rich and poor. The rot began earlier, ultimately with Thatcherism, but continued under New Labour.

Among British adults during the 1997–2005 Blair years, the proportion unable to make regular savings rose from 25 per cent to 27 per cent; the number unable to afford an annual holiday away from home rose from 18 per cent to 24 per cent; and the national proportion who could not afford to insure the contents of their home climbed a percentage point, from 8 per cent to 9 per cent. However, these national proportions conceal the way in which the rising exclusion has hit particular groups especially hard, not least a group that the Blair government had said it would help above all others: children living in poverty. The sources for all these facts are all detailed in Dorling (2010b). Brown's years as Prime Minister were a little less damning, but too short and turbulent a time to easily dovetail with the statistics.

The findings of that major ESRC research project on poverty through to 2010/2011, which was released during 2013, reveal more on trends in poverty during all the combined Blair and Brown years. What that survey also revealed is a growing hardness in attitudes that accompanied New Labour's period in office and was then cemented in place by the first two years of Coalition government:

> Harsh economic times have resulted in reduced minimum expectations of a social life for both adults and children. In 1999, nearly two thirds of the population believed that being able to have friends or family for a meal or a drink once a month was a necessity but this had dropped to under a half by 2012. Similarly, for children, being able to have their friends to visit for tea or a snack once a fortnight was seen as a necessity by the majority in 1999 but it now just falls short of the 50% approval mark. (Gordon et al. 2013: 7)

The comparison of poverty surveys taken towards the start and end of Tony Blair's time in office showed that, of all children, the proportion living in a family that could not afford to take a holiday away from home (or just to visit relatives) rose between 1999 and 2005, from 25 per cent to 32 per cent. This occurred even as the real incomes of most of the poorest rose; they just rose more for the affluent, making holidays more expensive for all and subtly changing what it meant to go on holiday.

The more recent statistics now show how living conditions for the poor fell from 1999, with most of the harm occurring in the 'New' Labour years, but a little being added since then. In 1999 only 3 per cent of households could not afford to keep their home warm. By 2012 that proportion was 10 per cent (Gordon at al. 2013: 12). Energy bills had risen, but the governments had allowed them to rise. Partly as a result of that, by 2012 one in ten households had damp in their home, a higher proportion than at any time since the 1970s. Perhaps because of these revelations, in his September 2013

party conference speech the (not so ‘New’ anymore) Labour leader Ed Miliband pledged to prevent energy companies increasing fuel bills in the future. He was labelled a socialist, as if that were an insult.

During the ‘New’ Labour (essentially Thatcherite) years, the rich became richer and housing became more expensive and more unequally distributed. The number of school-age children who had to share their bedroom with an adult or sibling over the age of ten and of the opposite sex rose from 8 per cent to 15 per cent nationally by 2005. Encouraging buy-to-let landlords in a new wave of privatisation did not help reduce overcrowding.

It was in London that such overcrowding became most acute and where sharing rooms rose most quickly. Keeping up appearances for the poor in London was much harder than in Britain as a whole, not simply because London had less space, but because within London other children were so often very wealthy, and quickly becoming so much wealthier under ‘New’ Labour. However, their rising wealth did not correlate with an increase in the medium income of families with children rising by much. In general, as the richest 1 per cent and 9 per cent got richer, the bottom 90 per cent got relatively poorer (Dorling 2013).

Greatly reducing the numbers of children living in households below 60 per cent of medium incomes still leaves many children in those households, or only just over that threshold. On average it became harder for a child to live a life according to the norms of society in 2005 as compared to 1999 because overall inequalities increased as mean incomes rose faster than mediums. Even among children at the same school, the incomes of their parents had diverged and, consequently, standards of living and expectations of the norm did too. Between 1999 and 2012 an extra half a million households in Britain found themselves to be overcrowded and not adequately housed when the same criteria were used to assess at both dates; an extra 2 per cent could not afford fresh fruit daily as

compared to 1999; 3 per cent more could not afford ‘meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent’; 2 per cent more than before ‘New’ Labour gained power could not afford two meals a day (Gordon et al. 2013, p. 12). That was Thatcherism continued, and that might be why Labour in 2013 began to promise to stand up for ordinary people more.

Nationally, the proportion of children who said their parent(s) could not afford to let them have friends round for tea doubled, from 4 per cent to 8 per cent by 2005. The proportion who could not afford to pursue a hobby or other leisure activity also rose, from 5 per cent to 7 per cent, and the proportion who could not afford to go on a school trip at least once a term doubled, from 3 per cent to 6 per cent. For children aged below five, the proportion whose parents could not afford to take them to playgroup each week also doubled under the Blair government, from 3 per cent to 6 per cent.

By 2012, 3 per cent of families could not afford properly fitting shoes for their children, twice as many as in 1999, and all other measures of clothing difficulty rose for the worst of groups. Some four million households could not afford an item seen as vital in 2012 as compared to 1999, like a telephone or washing machine. By 2012, 26 per cent of all children in Britain were living in families who could not afford a holiday other than staying with friends and family for even just one week in the year. In 1999 that proportion had been 22 per cent (Gordon et al. 2013: 14). This all became worse once the Coalition government gained power, but it was getting worse before that time too.

Concealing poverty becomes ever more difficult in an age of high and increasingly unequal consumption, and it becomes easier for us to imagine why someone might be tempted to go further into debt in order to pay for a playgroup rather than spend another day at home with a toddler or to pay for a school trip rather than pretend to be ill that day. Debt rose greatly amongst families with

children under ‘New’ Labour. The worst-off resorted to the increasing number of dodgy lending and saving schemes set up by loan sharks, or Christmas clubs such as Farepak, which went bust in 2006 and where the savers were not aided by ‘New’ Labour.

One Farepak victim made it clear what growing inequality meant:

> I have got four children, all at various ages. Like I say, you can’t tell the little two, Father Christmas can call next door, but he can’t call here you know. And with my husband being on sick as well, having to pay the mortgage and feed four kids and whatever, and £37 a week is not a lot. (Spalek and King 2007)

In April 2010, it was reported that ‘Customers who paid for hampers from Farepak are expected to receive less than £50 each, even as accountants and lawyers handling the liquidation rack up millions in fees’ (*The Times*, 27 April 2010). By 2013, the families first robbed by Farepak were still awaiting proper compensation and were still paying off the new debts that they had taken out to pay for the Christmas that Farepak never covered. But it is everyday expenses now, not saving for Christmas, that pose a greater problem.

The second most expensive of all consumption items are housing costs – rents or mortgages – and these have also diverged as income inequalities have increased. Having to move to a poorer area, or being unable to move out of one, is the geographical reality of social exclusion. People get into further debt trying to avoid this.

The most expensive consumer item is a car. The combination of the expense and necessity of car ownership is the reason why not having a car is, for many, a contemporary mark of social failure. It is also closely connected to why so many car firms were badly hit so early on in the financial crash of 2008, as they were selling debt

as much as selling cars. By 2008/9, two out of three children in Britain living in a household without a car were living with only one parent.

The chattels and behaviour that signal what it means to be poor change over time and in accordance with what most others have. By 2009, not having a car (outside of London) was, for a family – like not being able to go on the cheapest of summer holidays – a sign of stigma. The continued Thatcherism spanning 1979 to 2013 has pulled people further and further apart socially. Some now have more holidays than anyone ever had in 1979, and many have fewer. Some lack the space to park all of their cars, and others whose parents had one car now have none.

Growing poverty of experience – fewer being able to partake in the norms of society – was the outcome of having a government that was seriously relaxed about the rich becoming richer, 'as long as they paid their taxes' – as stated by 'New' Labour architect and government minister Peter Mandelson in a speech to California computer executives in 1998. (But 'New' Labour cut Her Majesty's Review staff, thereby reducing tax inspectors' abilities to chase the rich for their payments.)

The gaps between all families grew: between 'celebrity' and 'entrepreneur', between the 'affluent' and the merely 'hard working', and between those below them painted as being 'a bit slovenly', and those a little more 'down-in-the-mouth'. As the very rich got richer still, even those people 'earning' just a few thousand a week in income less than them began to feel a little worse off. And all the time the language kept on becoming harsher as the gaps between us grew.

Council housing became social housing, with the word 'social's' implications of charity rather than rights. All this set the scene for what the Coalition then did. The moral argument against allowing inequality to grow had not been won by 'New' Labour because it

was not believed by enough at the top of ‘New’ Labour. Not in practice.

Taxation became viewed by some in ‘New’ Labour as a form of charity: something one ‘did’ for the poor, not something you did for yourself too. Jobseeker’s Allowance of £9 a day was fine (as long as ‘one’ never imagined having to live off it oneself). But charity, or child tax credits, or Sure Start centres, are simply not enough if the income gaps between people are allowed to turn into chasms. Whether our gaps can be considered cracks or chasms can be established by looking at other similarly affluent societies.

International comparisons of the quintile range of income inequality are some of the most telling comparisons that can be made between countries. By 2005, after eight years of ‘New’ Labour government, the richest fifth received 7.2 times more income on average than the poorest fifth each year – up from 6.9 times in 1997. According to the United Nations Development Programme’s Annual Report (the most widely used source), this ratio has been 6.1 to 1 in Ireland; 5.6 to 1 in France; 4.0 to 1 in Sweden; and 3.4 to 1 in Japan. By contrast, in the United States that same ratio of inequality was 8.5 to 1. Between 1997 and 2005 the UK moved 0.3 points towards US levels of inequality, or almost one quarter of the way along the path to becoming as socially unequal as people are in the United States.

The great and the good of ‘New’ Labour mostly cared. But caring was not enough given thinking that had been rewired by too many years of living under growing inequality. The people who make up what is left of the party that governed until 6 May 2010 mostly know that it made huge mistakes, that what it did was not enough compared with what most other politicians in most other affluent countries in the world achieve today; not enough compared with what the 1906 or 1910 or 1945 or 1964, or even the 1974 governments achieved, all with less time and much less money.

This chapter was originally intended as a piece to be published by the Child Poverty Action Group in 2012. At the last minute they declined to publish it. The reason they gave was this:

> *Dear Danny,*
>
> *Many thanks for your piece on inequality during the Labour years. It's particularly interesting to think about how widening inequalities have affected our view of the norm in recent years, as well as how they potentially explain surging debt levels over the 2000s.*
>
> *When we looked at all the pieces together for the progress report, however, we realised that this piece did not fit the overall narrative well i.e. that the strides made on child poverty, while falling short of the interim target, were significant and meaningful, and hence should not be dismissed as many in government and elsewhere are currently doing.*
>
> *Given that the purpose of the progress report is to head off a negative interpretation of HBAI* [the Households Below Average Income report issued by the Department of Work and Pensions] *when it is released, we have struggled a bit to work out how to slot your piece into the project. I hope you do not mind too much but we decided after some discussion not to run a chapter on inequality. ...*

They were right. What I say above did not fit their overall narrative of that time well. The overall narrative, by 2012, was for there still to be broad agreement between the two parties of coalition and the (now not so 'New') Labour Party. All these products of the Thatcher consensus largely agreed on what was best for Thatcher's

grandchildren. They differed a little over how much pain they thought it was acceptable for the poor to bear. They all agreed that it would be nice not to have too many very poor children, too many living on below 60 per cent of median incomes, and to limit the numbers of extremely poor pensioners that could be seen, but other than that there was little – for them – to be done.

On 14 June 2012 the HBAI figures referred to in the quote above were released. A day later, in the analysis of them it was reported: 'Average private incomes fall over 7% in the three years to 2010–11.' This was the leading sentence of the Institute for Fiscal Studies' press release (IFS 2012). The IFS did report that despite 'New' Labour missing its final child poverty target between 1998–9 and 2010–11, it was still the case that: 'Annual entitlements to net state support – that is, benefits and tax credits minus direct taxes – rose by an average of £4,000 per year for the poorest half of households with children.' 'New' Labour had reduced the worst effects of child poverty for many children not quite at the bottom by increasing cash or tax-break handouts. But this was a policy measure that was easy to partly dismantle after 2011.

For adults without children, including those just about to become new parents, by the end of the 'New' Labour years:

> …relative poverty among working age adults without children remains close to its highest level since at least 1961. ... [and] Even more striking is the fact that absolute poverty (based on a poverty line fixed at 60% of the 1996–97 median income, adjusted for inflation) among working aged adults without children was no lower in 2010–11 than in the 1970s on an after-housing-costs basis (and only a little lower on a before-housing costs basis). (IFS 2012)

Conclusions

Between the 1970s and 2010 something changed which ensured that those at the bottom of society in the UK saw their economic position stagnating despite the growing wealth and income of most in society. When 'New' Labour took power in 1997, and consequently took responsibility for Thatcher's grandchildren, they increased state welfare payments to poorer families considerably and also introduced a minimum wage for those in work. However, none of this was enough to achieve their poverty targets, nor to cement real change, the more progressive parts of which could not have so easily been undone by the incoming Coalition government.

If many people continue to believe that 'New' Labour did reduce child poverty considerably then there is little hope in the immediate future of real reductions under any of the three main political parties. This is because being in poverty means not being able to take part in the normal life of society. At the extremes, it means going hungry and, for a child, going to school with no underwear on. Your classmates realize this when you change for PE, or when they discover that you lied about your summer holiday, or when you can't go on the school trip, or to a friend's birthday party.

Thatcherism and its 'New' Labour appendage leave the children and grandchildren of the rich in a worse, more ignorant place as well as leaving their contemporaries among the poor worse off as well. It is not hard to show how poverty has become more felt, more acute, as inequalities have grown. It is far harder to understand how putting the affluent on a pedestal – supposedly there because of their achievements – will so often lead to their ridicule, embarrassment and failure. As Ed Miliband put it in that 2013 leader's speech, a rising tide lifts a few yachts, but not all boats. When inequality rises it demeans both rich and poor. Dignity is a feature of more equal societies – for everyone.

Notes

Danny Dorling was Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield when this article was written. He is currently the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford. For a longer and better referenced (although a little dated) version of this argument and accounting, see *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists* (Policy Press, 2009). An early long version of the chapter first appeared as an article in *Poverty*, the journal of the Child Poverty Action Group, in 2010; here the argument has been made a little firmer.

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