

LEARNING THE HARD WAY

Danny Dorling argues policy-makers should learn from all their commissioned studies, not just cherry pick the convenient parts of the convenient ones

Government in Britain is still setting a bad example to the rest of the world in terms of the selectivity of its reporting and its summarising of its own commissioned research. This particularly affects the debate over regional inequalities and trends in them.

Writing in April 2007, I take the words of three government ministers. Currently their roles are as Secretary of State for the Environment (David Miliband); Minister of State for Housing and Planning (Yvette Cooper); and the Minister for Work (Jim Murphy). I pick on these three because they are not easy targets; indeed, they are who we should be looking to to be making a difference to our cities and regions in the future.

My worry is that a general concern that ministers have: to paint a rosy story, coupled with a spin they themselves receive from their key advisors, results in a general air of unreality and unsustainable comment being made continuously. How are these people with great personal integrity being failed by the government policy machinery?

At the very top of government leaders are cocooned from the world to such an extent that they find it very hard to understand why they may be unpopular. But why, lower down in the government apparatus are junior Ministers also selectively quoting our research and statistics in an easily misunderstood way? Here is the first of my three examples:

“‘The State of the Cities’ report was published just two or three weeks ago and it looked at the 56 primary urban areas of England, not just the eight biggest cities outside London, but the next forty-eight towns and cities, and it came to a stunning conclusion.

Twenty years ago, if we’d been having a conference about cities people would have talked about decline: about declining population; declining economies; declining public services. ‘The State of the Cities’ report - the most comprehensive analysis of Urban Britain for forty or fifty years - said that not only were our towns and cities getting better, not only were they getting better economically and socially faster than the national average, but that we had the best opportunity for a hundred years to make our towns and cities our leading towns and cities, not just good by British standards, but excellent in European terms.”

David Miliband [1]

What the data in the report showed was that some cities were becoming better-off and some not so better-off – and a gap was growing between them. They were certainly not all getting “better economically and socially” than the national average, as the quote above implies. Nor were they amounting to be excellent in European

terms. I know because I worked with a group of researchers to pull together some of the data for the report.

Here's another example of a more local issue coming from a statement made by another minister almost a year latter. How do you square this quote from their press release?

“The transformation of many of our coalfield areas has been dramatic. When the pits were closed many coalfield communities saw soaring unemployment and their communities were devastated. Now, thanks to coalfield regeneration, the jobs are coming back.

Many former miners have had training to get new jobs and whole communities are being revived. On some of the pit sites we are even seeing more jobs above ground than there were below when the pits were open. ...”

Yvette Cooper [3]

With this:

“The growth in replacement jobs in the coalfields that was evident before 1998 continued over the next five years but at a slower pace than in non-coalfield areas. Moreover, despite some relative improvements, the deprivation, health, educational qualifications and enterprise ‘deficits’ in the coalfields persisted as a long-term legacy from the loss of mining employment (see paragraphs 31-33). These deficits hampered and will continue to hamper the capacity of residents to benefit from any increased job opportunities that come their way.”

Source: Para 24 of “Regenerating the English Coalfields”

Finally, and perhaps a salutatory warning of what came happen if you are too honest over your hopes and fears as a minister; during his lunch break on Friday March 9th the Minister for Work, Jim Murphy, posted a message to his ‘blog’. He may have been in a hurry to get to his next meeting, but at least it was not all carefully crafted spin. This is what he said:

“Into the valleys

I was visiting the Welsh valleys today to discuss how we can get more people into work. My colleagues, John Hutton, Anne McGuire, James Plaskitt and Lord McKenzie of Luton have also covered a fair few miles between them from Cardiff and Swansea to North Wales and Usk. Wales is a classic example of the success we’ve had in getting more people into work – there are over 130,000 more people in work and whilst cities like Cardiff have been transformed, there are still parts of the country where a life on benefits is still the norm.

This leads us to a number of questions: Why do less people find work in the valleys than in the rest of Wales? Why are you more likely to get a job in the Cynon Valley, for example, than in Merthyr Tydfil? How can we help 20 thousand more people off Incapacity Benefit and into work? Chatting to local

MPs, employers and other people on the ground has given me a much better appreciation of the issues.

So what's the answer? This is probably going to sound like a typical politician's response but I believe there isn't one, single answer. There are many. What's important is making sure local areas combine the support of different organisations, private and voluntary, to best effect. We'll be on the right path when a lone parent in the valleys doesn't have to worry about who's looking after the kids or if they have the right skills for a job because they know all the back-up they need has already been sorted out in the first place.

This entry was posted on Friday, 9 March 2007 at 1:59 PM by Jim Murphy”.

Source: Jim Murphy's blog [5].

So what thanks did Jim get for admitting that there are still parts of the country where life on benefits are the norm. That there is no easy answer. And that there are still great inequalities?

The comments to his blog are vetted by civil servants at the Department of Work and Pensions – despite that, they let this comment through:

“Robert wrote:

And then you woke up at home with your family and said love I had a nice dream I made Wales a nice place to live with lots of jobs and the sick and disabled rose up and walked.

#2 – Posted on 13-Mar-07 at 8:46 am.

Damned if they dream, damned if they spin, damned if they are honest, damned when they lie. It is hardly surprising that Ministers and many others at the top of numerous policy ladders begin to be unsure of the plot.

The actual story of economic inequalities is revealed in statistics which receive very little coverage in government reports, or in Ministerial pronouncements . Buried in the press release (15 December 2006) for the latest estimates of regional Gross Value Added you find that:

“Shares of GVA: London (17.0 per cent) and the South East (15.6 per cent) had the largest share of total UK GVA in 2005. London's and the South East's share of UK GVA has increased since 1995 when it accounted for 15.2 per cent and 14.9 per cent respectively. Northern Ireland (2.3 per cent) and the North East (3.4 per cent) had the smallest share of UK GVA in 2005.” [6]

A week after this statement was made another part of government, the Department of Health, released “Tackling health inequalities: 2003-05” its data update for the national 2010 PSA target on health (21 December 2006). That reported showed geographically inequalities in mortality between regions continue to widened.

And it is now universally acknowledged that geographical trends in health follow those in wealth. True, there are great problems with government's regional accounts, but that is not reason to ignore them. Although for an entertaining summary, read the

words of the then National Statistician Len Cook, in 2002, on his receipt of personal abuse and the complete mess that regional statistics are in in general [7]

Our cities are becoming more unequal both within and between them. Outside our cities our coalfields are not catching up with the average, let alone the affluent areas which they moved even further away from so rapidly all those years ago in 1984/85. Our regions are slowly pulling apart; and our countries are less and less united in common experience.

So here is my advice for these Ministers. Before you try to find the answer, or suggest that there are a plethora of answers, you need a better picture of what the question is. The central question for you all is why we are still becoming more unequal: individually, by community, by city and by region?

Read the reports not just the press releases, and not just the two page summaries that your officials hand you as your limousine speeds off for that visit to the regions!

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[1] Speaking on 3rd of April 2006 as then-Minister of Communities and Local Government, Presentation for “The Work Foundation”:

http://www.theworkfoundation.com/Assets/pdfs/Ideopolis_DavidMilibandspeech.pdf

[2] For more details and a summary table showing how each of the 56 cities actually fared see:

http://sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/publications/2006/dorling_inequalityinBritain1997_corrected.pdf

[3] From press release DCLG 22/3/2007 “Coalfields discover they have a second life”, quote: Housing Minister, Yvette Cooper, 22 March, 2007.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1002882&PressNoticeID=2382>

[4] Extract taken from executive summary of the report the minister was referring to “Regenerating the English Coalfields” – interim evaluation of the coalfield regeneration programmes, published by DCLG:

http://www.communities.gov.uk/pub/894/InterimEvaluationofthecoalfieldsregenerationprogrammes_id1508894.pdf

[5] Taken from Jim Murphy’s blog [5]

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/blog/index.php/page/2/>

[6] Available on-line at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/gva1206.pdf>

[7] Available on-line at

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmtreasy/1289/2103009.htm>