

The logo for the Child Poverty Action Group is a bright pink, irregular quadrilateral shape. Inside this shape, the words "CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP" are written in white, bold, uppercase letters, stacked vertically.

**CHILD  
POVERTY  
ACTION  
GROUP**

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**1965 TO 2015**

Pat Thane and Ruth Davidson

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Pat Thane and Ruth Davidson

MAY 2016

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It does not have to be like this: we work to understand what causes poverty, the impact it has on children's lives, and how it can be prevented and solved – for good. We develop and campaign for policy solutions to end child poverty. We also provide accurate information, training and advice to the people who work with hard-up families, to make sure they get the financial support they need, and carry out high profile legal work to establish and confirm families' rights. If you are not already supporting us, please consider making a donation, or ask for details of our membership schemes, training courses and publications.

Published by CPAG  
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Design by Colorido Studios  
Typesetting/page makeup by Devious Designs  
Printed by Calverts Press



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The authors would like to thank the large number of CPAG staff, members and committee members, both past and present, who have enthusiastically contributed to this project. Firstly, Alison Garnham, the current CPAG Chief Executive, for suggesting the project to us, and the CPAG staff who have been supportive in providing more contemporary information and assisted in getting this manuscript to publication. In particular, we would like to acknowledge Imran Hussain, Lindsay Judge, Alison Key and Jessica Sinclair Taylor.

Secondly, those who participated in the two witness seminars held during 2015: Jonathan Bradshaw, Martin Barnes, Fran Bennett, Virginia Bottomley, David Bull, Paul Dornan, Kate Green, Ruth Lister, Carey Oppenheim, Garry Runciman, Adrian Sinfield, Jane Streater, John Veit-Wilson, Sally Witcher, John Ward and Stuart Weir. Many of the above also helpfully gave up their time for the oral history project alongside the following who we would also like to thank: Tony Atkinson, David Donnison, Frank Field, Geoff Fimister, Peter Golding, Lisa Harker, Shan Nicholas, Alan Walker, Sue Ward and Peter Wiles.

Archivists at the London School of Economics (LSE) and the University of Essex were incredibly generous in providing materials and guidance. At the LSE, alongside the many friendly staff on the reception desk, too numerous to acknowledge, we would also like to thank Anna Towlson and Nick White. And at the University of Essex Archive, Nigel Cochrane. We would also like to thank Virginia Preston and Michael Kandiah of the Institute of Contemporary British History for managing what were two extremely insightful witness seminars, and Jill Manthorpe and Stephen Martineau of the Social Care Workforce Research Unit at King's College for running a Social Work History Network seminar on CPAG.

Finally, we would like to especially thank George Gosling and Lise Butler for their contributions to the research process, both of whom at points contributed essential research reports.

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# ONE 'THE POOR AND THE POOREST'

The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) was founded in 1965 in response to growing concern among social workers and social researchers about the extent of poverty they perceived in Britain, contrary to the widespread belief that it had largely been eliminated in the post-war welfare state.

One group much concerned, especially about family poverty, was the Quaker Social and Economic Affairs Committee (SEAC). In 1964, it published a pamphlet by one of its members, social scientist Harriett Wilson. Entitled *Poverty in Britain Today* and based on Wilson's research among families in Cardiff, this exposed the inadequacy of national assistance benefits and the difficulties of families living in poverty.

In October 1964 Labour was re-elected to government after what it described as the '13 wasted years' of Conservatism. SEAC and many others had high hopes that Labour would recognise, and act quickly to redress, family poverty – initially by raising the universal, but minimal, family allowances introduced in 1946 for all but the first child in all families. But Labour felt constrained politically, because it had a majority of only four seats, and economically, because it inherited an unexpectedly large balance-of-payments deficit – an estimated £800 million, the highest since the war. This, combined with continuing financial problems, limited its scope for welfare reform throughout its period of office to 1970. It was also already committed to other reforms and gave priority to long overdue increases to pensions and other national insurance and national assistance benefits. Family allowances were less popular with voters, many of whom believed they were dubious incentives to increase the birth rate, rather than to diminish poverty.

When Labour's first Queen's Speech failed to mention family poverty, SEAC decided to pile on pressure. Harriett Wilson organised a meeting at Toynbee Hall, the East London Settlement House, on 5 March 1965, inviting people whose work – with local authorities, in voluntary organisations and in universities – brought them into contact with poverty to 'register our alarm' at the government's failure to increase family allowances. SEAC believed this was the essential first step to

alleviating family poverty. Harriett Wilson invited the London School of Economics (LSE) academic and Labour Party adviser on social security, Brian Abel-Smith, to address the meeting.

Brian Abel-Smith<sup>1</sup> and his colleague, Peter Townsend,<sup>2</sup> were researching poverty in Britain and revealing much higher levels than expected. The research was published in December 1965 as *The Poor and the Poorest* and was much heralded as the 'rediscovery of poverty'. They found that, in 1960, 7.4 million people were living in poverty, including 3 million retired people and, much more surprisingly, 2.25 million children – 41 per cent of them in households that included a full-time worker, despite the social security reforms and unprecedented full employment since 1945. The conventional wisdom by the 1960s was that serious poverty survived only among older people. It did, but they were not alone.



In 1960, 7.4 million people were living in poverty, including 3 million retired people and 2.25 million children.

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Townsend and Abel-Smith defined poverty in this research as living on an income at or below 140 per cent of the basic benefit rates paid by the National Assistance Board (NAB) since its foundation in 1948. This was a different measure from those used in the famous surveys by Booth and Rowntree at the beginning of the century or by most researchers since that time, which equated poverty with serious insufficiency of resources to cover basic needs, including food, shelter and clothing. This definition had been adopted for setting means-tested NAB benefits for the poorest people, but Townsend argued that, in the modern world, people, especially children, living on incomes adequate for bare survival, but way below the prevailing standards, were severely disadvantaged in educational and work opportunities by poor health and exclusion from the life most people judged normal. He and Abel-Smith found there were large numbers of people in such poverty, not due to their personal inadequacies, as some believed, but because of low pay, even for full-time work, and the failings of the social security system, including the inadequacy and low take-up of benefits – the same causes Booth and Rowntree had identified at the beginning of the century, long before the post-war welfare state.

William Beveridge had proposed in 1942, in the plan for social security that influenced post-war developments, a system of universal contributory social insurance benefits to support individuals and families who lacked income from employment because of sickness, unemployment, widowhood or old age. He argued that a universal contributory system would ensure that people knew that



they and others had a right to benefits, because they had paid for them, and were not dependent on taxpayers, and that a system which covered the whole working population would ensure that all would identify with and support it and would not disparage claimants or seek to cut benefits. He recommended that all social insurance benefits should provide full 'subsistence', covering the essentials of food, shelter, fuel and clothing, sufficient to provide a 'safety net' protecting families and individuals from poverty and means testing. This was never fully implemented by the post-war Labour government: most insurance benefits, including pensions, were set below the post-war equivalent to the subsistence standard recommended by Beveridge and very many claimants became dependent on means-tested NAB supplements, as Beveridge had not intended. He opposed means testing because it was costly to administer and failed to reach many in need who were unaware of their entitlement or who felt stigmatised by the process. He recognised that some means testing was unavoidable, since some people would always slip through the net of social insurance, but he believed that it should be avoided as much as possible by introducing comprehensive universal benefits. This should include a non-contributory allowance for children other than the first child in each family, to assist families with the costs of each additional child.

Another reason for the child allowance was, as Beveridge wrote, that:<sup>3</sup>

*... it is dangerous to allow benefit during unemployment or disability to equal or exceed earnings during work. But without allowances for children this danger cannot be avoided.*

The post-war benefit system avoided this 'danger' through the 'wage-stop', whereby benefits were capped at, or sometimes below, the level of previous earnings. Pre-war surveys had shown that many people were in poverty while working full time, because of low pay. This continued after the war and families already poor when the wage earner was working remained so when s/he was sick or unemployed and their benefits were capped, or if they moved from benefits to low-paid work, their incomes could fall. A further problem for low-paid families was that family allowances were introduced in 1946 for all but first children, up to age 16, but they remained low. In 1956, the Conservative government extended them to all children, except the first, to age 18 if they remained in full-time education or had an apprenticeship. It raised the payments to the still low levels of 8s (40p) per week (the amount originally recommended by Beveridge) and then, later in 1956, to 10s (50p) for the third and subsequent children. They did not increase again.

By the 1960s, the problem of poverty had not gone away in Britain, nor in many other countries. Concern about continuing poverty in affluent societies was growing at this time. An international conference on poverty research met in Paris in 1964, but the social scientists and others involved had difficulty gaining widespread attention. Awareness was much greater, and had a more immediate political impact, in the United States, where unemployment was higher than in

Europe. 1964 was also President Lyndon Johnson's 'great society' year, when he launched a 'war on poverty', aiming to alleviate the extensive poverty revealed by American research, particularly Michael Harrington's *The Other America* in 1962. This did attract interest in the UK.

Brian Abel-Smith gave the Toynbee Hall meeting the latest findings of his and Townsend's poverty research. The meeting resolved to appoint someone to publicise these findings and 'correct misapprehensions about the poor' by alerting the press. It also decided to draft an 'explanatory pamphlet for social workers on the way the NAB works and often fails to meet the needs of certain families' and to campaign for higher family allowances. Harriett Wilson and her colleagues planned to establish a group to lobby and research about family poverty, since none existed comparable with the campaigns for other disadvantaged groups, such as older people. The next step was a committee meeting on 5 April in the London office of Fred Philp, Director of Family Service Units, whose social workers were much concerned about the poverty they encountered in families. Philp became the first chair of the new group, until 1969 when Peter Townsend took over. Others present included Harriett Wilson and her son John Veit-Wilson, who was also a social research academic then working with Townsend and Abel-Smith. He would be long active in CPAG, retiring as a trustee in 2013. Nine other researchers and social workers also attended.

As yet, the group had no name, and its aims and tactics were undecided. It was referred to as the 'Poverty Group' or 'Family Poverty Group'. Most committee members saw it as a Fabian-style research group, working closely with and influencing government, with particular links to Labour. It was decided to draft a memorandum on family poverty to send to the government. 'Child poverty' was not mentioned in the minutes of meetings. As the committee members saw it, poor children lived in poor families. In the following months, the memorandum was completed. In October, 'Child Poverty Action Group' was adopted as the name, suggested by Harriett Wilson as likely to win more public sympathy than 'family poverty', which risked inciting right-wing tabloid rants about 'scroungers'.

CPAG, as it was soon known, joined, collaborated and competed with a new wave of campaigning groups publicising neglected poverty issues. The 1960s were not just about glamorous 'swinging'; there was growing awareness of a much more miserable side to UK life. New organisations included Shelter, founded in 1966 to help homeless people – not a new problem, but one long ignored and stigmatised. Shelter built on the success of Ken Loach's TV film, *Cathy Come Home*, about a young homeless couple, which showed that homelessness was a current problem for some ordinary families, not confined to drunken layabouts as widely believed. Shelter later worked closely with CPAG. The Disablement Income Group (DIG) was started in 1965 by Megan du Boisson, a married woman with multiple sclerosis who discovered that non-wage-earning wives were not entitled to sickness or disability benefit. DIG campaigned successfully, with growing support, to change this. These and other groups emerged from the increasing awareness of the inadequacies of the welfare state, from hopes

aroused by the return of a Labour government, and a mounting climate of public protest, especially among younger people anxious to make the world a better, less unequal, place, in a culture becoming less deferential and encouraged by an increasingly sensation-hungry press, of which campaigners took full advantage.

CPAG built up to a public launch in December 1965, when *The Poor and the Poorest* was due for publication, timed to attract maximum sympathy from families enjoying Christmas. Thirty-seven well-known people<sup>4</sup> led by Baroness Barbara Wootton,<sup>5</sup> signed a letter to Prime Minister Harold Wilson together with the family poverty memo. This stressed the numbers of children in poverty and how this harmed their development. It proposed as a solution integrating family allowances with the long-established (since 1911) child tax allowances, which only benefited the better-off since few manual workers paid income tax at this time. Wilson met representatives of CPAG briefly the following day, observed by journalists in Downing Street. 'Many British children living in hardship and poverty' (*The Times*), and 'Poverty plea to Wilson' (*Daily Express*) were among the sympathetic headlines.

A second press conference, on Christmas Eve, chaired by Barbara Wootton, announced the publication of *The Poor and the Poorest*, a slim 78-page paperback. She explained the aims of CPAG and appealed for support. That evening, Brian Abel-Smith appeared on the 9pm ITV news and 10pm BBC radio news, and the BBC screened a documentary about children in poor families, represented as honest hard-working families with insufficient earnings. The documentary makers were so moved that they returned with toys and food for the families – more sympathetic to families on benefits than some of their twenty-first century successors.<sup>6</sup>

#### Notes

1. Brian Abel-Smith (1926–1996), Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics, specialist in, and adviser to the Labour Party on, social security policy. See S Sheard, *The Passionate Economist: how Brian Abel-Smith shaped global health and social welfare*, Policy Press, 2014
2. Peter Townsend (1928–2009), Professor of Sociology, University of Essex, until 1963 a colleague of Abel-Smith at the London School of Economics, researched and wrote extensively on aspects of poverty, notably *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (1979). See H Glennerster 'Townsend, Peter Brereton, 1928–2009' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004–2015
3. *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, para 412
4. Mostly social science academics with some social services administrators
5. Barbara Wootton, Baroness Wootton of Abinger (1897–1988), social scientist, Professor at Bedford College, University of London, author of a number of books on criminology and social policy, governor of the BBC, member of Royal Commissions, one of the first life peeresses, deputy speaker of the House of Lords from 1967. See A Oakley, *A Critical Woman: Barbara Wootton, Social Science and Public Policy in the Twentieth Century*, Bloomsbury, 2011
6. S Sheard, *The Passionate Economist: how Brian Abel-Smith shaped global health and social welfare*, Policy Press, 2014, p1

# TWO CPAG STARTS WORK

Tony Lynes, an academic colleague of Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend at the London School of Economics (LSE), then an adviser to the Minister of Social Security and a founder member of the Child Poverty Action Group, was appointed its full-time secretary in August 1966. He launched the monthly journal *Poverty* later in the same year.

He set up offices first at the Family Service Units headquarters in Marylebone Road, London, then at an LSE research centre in Bloomsbury, and more permanently in May 1967 in small, shabby rooms in Macklin Street, off Drury Lane in central London. At the beginning of 1966, CPAG had 13 subscribing members,<sup>1</sup> by the end of the year 450, and by April 1968 around 1,200. It saw its role as lobbying central government and using media publicity to exert pressure. As Tony Lynes described his work:<sup>2</sup>

*'I cycle over to the House and listen to a debate in the afternoon, then I come back here and draft a press release, then I cycle up Fleet Street distributing it and that's really all we need to do.'*

Finances were precarious. Initially, Lynes had little support apart from volunteers, and for some years the staffing was small. Publications helped, including the *Guide to Supplementary Benefit Appeal Tribunals*, which sold successfully at 6d per copy from 1968. CPAG tried imaginative ways to raise funds. In 1968, it asked permission to make a collection at the premiere of a highly appropriate film, *Oliver*, in Leicester Square, but the cinema refused. CPAG branches were urged to try similar initiatives at their local cinemas.

CPAG saw its main focus as pressing the Labour government to increase the universal family allowances, to be funded by withdrawing child tax allowances which mainly benefited the better off. The government responded with a small increase to family allowances in July 1965, followed by further rises in 1967 and 1968, the latter linked with cuts to child tax allowances, so that standard rate taxpayers made no net gain. This was known as 'claw-back', an innovation in government policy. It was a response to CPAG's demands, though less generous than it had hoped. The government also introduced means-tested rent rebates

for those on low incomes, free school meals for all fourth and subsequent children and free welfare milk for all third and subsequent children. In 1966, it replaced the National Assistance Board with the Supplementary Benefits Commission (SBC), which was intended to administer benefits more humanely. But in 1968, it reintroduced prescription charges, which it had abolished in 1964, raised charges for dental treatment and school meals, and withdrew free milk from secondary schools. Supplementary benefit claimants were exempted and workers on low incomes could claim refunds, but CPAG complained that rebates and exemptions were inadequately publicised, too many eligible people did not claim these means-tested benefits and the value of the limited improvements to benefits and services was eroded by price rises and the simultaneous increase in employee national insurance contributions. Individual claimants could be subject to six or more means tests for different benefits. CPAG proposed, instead, a single test.

Another major campaigning issue for CPAG was for clearer, more accessible, information on eligibility for benefits, as it realised how many people were poor because they were unaware of their eligibility and did not apply. The problems identified by Beveridge had not gone away. CPAG branches produced leaflets explaining eligibility. This was not easy. SBC rules on the detailed administration, including the distribution of discretionary benefits, were officially secret, embodied in the 'A Code', covered by the Official Secrets Act, and not disclosed to social workers, still less to claimants. In 1971, Frank Field, a former lecturer and local Labour councillor, who had replaced Tony Lynes at CPAG (with the title of Director) in 1969, received a leak from an anonymous source and revealed its contents in the *Guardian*.<sup>3</sup>



At the beginning of 1966, CPAG had 13 subscribing members, by the end of the year 450, and by April 1968 around 1,200.

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The 'wage-stop' made conditions worse: it ensured that some families did not gain from increased family allowances when out of work if this raised their income above previous earnings. CPAG campaigned for its abolition, and for higher wages. As news spread about CPAG, Tony Lynes received letters from individuals asking for advice on benefits and he assisted in appeals where claims appeared to have been unfairly refused. In 1969, CPAG gained funding from the Rowntree Charitable Trust for a part-time legal officer to assist with such appeals, supported by a legal committee comprising lawyers among its supporters – notably Henry Hodge, CPAG's solicitor.

Hodge was committed to enabling less privileged people on low incomes to make use of the legal system on equal terms with the better off, helping them to access legal aid. He was active and influential in CPAG for many years, becoming Deputy Director in 1972 for five years. He was a Labour councillor in Islington between 1974 and 1978, where he met and married the future Labour minister, Margaret Hodge, and ended his career at his death in 2009 as a High Court judge, a rare achievement for a solicitor.

The Rowntree Trust also gave initial funding to the Citizens' Rights Office (CRO), which opened in early 1970 to promote this legal work and then played a major role in CPAG activities. Hodge developed the strategy of taking up test cases to challenge social security law and administration where it appeared unjust, which became and remains an important CPAG activity. He was part-time Director of CRO, then Deputy Director from 1972 when Stuart Weir was appointed its first full-time Director. Weir was a journalist who had promoted citizens' rights services in the London Borough of Hackney. CRO thereafter supported the growing number of CPAG branches across the country in informing people of their welfare rights and supporting appeals, including against the wage-stop, to SBC tribunals, since no legal aid was available for this purpose and appeals could be costly. CRO also ran innovative welfare rights courses for social workers and others. This work was part of an international welfare rights movement at the time, originating in the United States, which helped inspire CPAG's activities.

#### Notes

1. Listed as: Brian Abel-Smith; Walter Birmingham, Warden of Toynbee Hall; MF Bligh (Mrs) former Children's Moral Welfare Worker; Barbara Drake, Children's Officer, Tower Hamlets; Elisabeth Gittus, Lecturer in Social Science, Liverpool; Audrey Harvey (Mrs), author of *Housing in the Sixties* and CAB worker; AF Philp, Secretary FSUs (Chairman); Geoffrey Rankin, Islington and North London FSU; Morna Smith, Assistant General Secretary, Social Services Department, National Association for Mental Health; Peter Townsend; John Veit-Wilson, sociologist; Harriett Wilson; Stephen Wyatt, Oldham and District FSU.
2. D Bull, 'What an amazing time to be involved in this sort of politics: Child Poverty Action Group', in H Curtis and M Sanderson (eds), *The Unsung Sixties: memoirs of social innovation*, Whiting and Birch Ltd, 2004, p118
3. See note 2, p122

# THREE PROMOTING WELFARE RIGHTS

CPAG did not set out to be a grassroots organisation. But as its reputation grew, supporters outside London wanted activist branches to deal with urgent local problems, so that, while waiting for government action which might never come, they might help poor families directly, including with advice about claiming their full entitlement to benefits.

Initially, Tony Lynes could not see the need for local branches and felt, understandably, that he had no time to manage them. However, he quickly recognised their value and encouraged them, although he found that they created an overwhelming workload, locking him into office-based organisation and away from activism. This contributed to his resignation in November 1968 to take up welfare rights work in Oxfordshire.

The first CPAG branch was established in Liverpool, followed by Manchester, both in 1967. By 1968 there were branches in Birmingham, Oxford, Sheffield, Camden, Hull, York, Swansea, Aberdeen, Clydeside and Tyneside, among others, with many more to come. The Scottish Poverty Action Group was established in May 1968, as well as a semi-autonomous Northern Ireland Group in early 1968. Active branch members included social workers, teachers and academic researchers on poverty, who also contributed reports and articles to CPAG. Some branches are still active; others ran out of steam in just a few years as members moved away or were overwhelmed by other commitments, while others flourished.

Initially, branches were invited to send representatives to executive committee meetings, but the numbers quickly became unmanageable. From October 1968, twice-yearly conferences brought branch representatives together as a Branches Council and six representatives were elected to the executive committee. They determined their own activities, which varied according to local needs and the interests of the activists. Mainly they focused on welfare rights advice, often establishing welfare rights stalls in public places, such as street markets, issuing pamphlets and booklets with details of entitlements and how to access them, advising and informing social workers and pressing local Supplementary Benefits



An early welfare rights stall run by Colchester branch

Commission offices to publicise details of entitlement more effectively. They assisted claimants with appeals against benefit decisions, often working with the law departments of local universities.

CPAG stimulated some local authorities to appoint welfare rights advisers, the first being Tony Lynes in Oxfordshire. In 1975, CPAG was to play a key role in bringing together local authority welfare rights services in the National Welfare Rights Officers' Group (now the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers). Branches educated many students who joined their work on welfare rights stalls and surveys, increasing their understanding of the extent and nature of poverty, inspiring some to follow careers in social services, government and universities and to make important contributions to tackling poverty.

Branches publicised their policies and services through local newspapers and radio. Some conducted research into local conditions, particularly on the take-up and administration of means-tested benefits, including school meals, uniform grants and educational maintenance allowances. They revealed, for example, the humiliating treatment of some children receiving free school meals, who were sometimes segregated, given separate, inferior meals, and, in one school, even made to enter the dining hall through a separate entrance. In all these ways, CPAG both supported individual families in poverty, as it had not originally intended, and promoted their collective interest through lobbying government. Both forms of activity became equally important in its work. There was always a danger of the Group being pulled in too many directions, but Frank Field kept the central organisation focused on improving child benefits. From 1972 to 1975 Jane Streather, who had set up the Hull branch, served as Branches Officer, supporting and encouraging branch activities, while relieving the Director of the work of keeping in close contact with them.



# FOUR 'THE POOR GET POORER UNDER LABOUR'

CPAG's relations with the Labour government became increasingly tense. Frank Field was determined that CPAG should regard itself as not tied to Labour, but should be critical when necessary, and supportive when necessary, of any party in government, being strictly party neutral, as it has since remained.

In April 1970, Field and Townsend produced a memorandum, later published as *Poverty and the Labour Government*, arguing that Labour had not sufficiently prioritised low-income families, some of whom had experienced worsening conditions since 1964. They supported, among other measures, a minimum wage. They had discussed all of this in January in an acrimonious meeting with Minister Richard Crossman, with his adviser, Brian Abel-Smith, and civil servants. Abel-Smith had resigned from the CPAG executive committee because he felt it was incompatible with his new role with Crossman. He called the meeting 'the biggest embarrassment I ever had...'<sup>1</sup> but stayed loyal to Crossman while trying to mend relations between the Ministry and CPAG. Following the meeting, CPAG issued the memorandum to the press.



CPAG collaborated with other groups demanding improved support for pensioners, disabled people and one-parent families, as well as for low-income families.

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The disagreement continued in private and in the media in the run-up to the June 1970 general election. Meanwhile, CPAG collaborated with other groups demanding improved support for pensioners, disabled people and one-parent families, as well as for low-income families. It began to campaign much more publicly than before, at the national level, with considerable impact. In May, it issued an election manifesto, *A War on Poverty: poor families and the election*, with press releases headed 'Poor get poorer under Labour', repeating its and other campaigners' demands. It got good radio, TV and press coverage which impressed politicians. Edward Heath, the Conservative leader, wrote a letter of support to CPAG and repeatedly quoted its claims in campaign speeches attacking Labour.

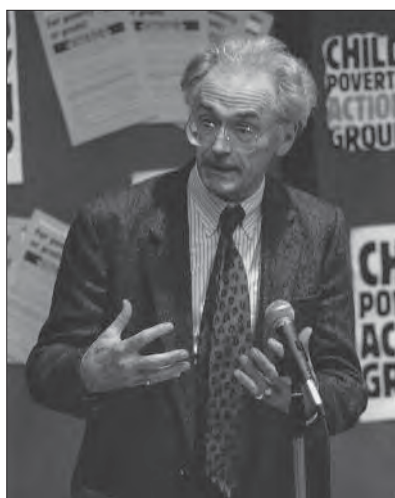
CPAG's attacks on Labour increased its credibility among Conservatives and more widely, raising its national profile and that of poverty as a political issue, while some blamed it for helping to bring about Labour's election defeat.

#### Notes

1. S Sheard, *The Passionate Economist: how Brian Abel-Smith shaped global health and social welfare*, Policy Press, 2014, p257

# FIVE CHALLENGING THE 'POVERTY TRAP'

Frank Field believed it was important to lobby influential figures in all political parties and did so effectively, gaining cross-party backbench support and respect at all levels of the main parties and from civil servants for the accuracy and usefulness of the information and advice CPAG supplied.



CPAG founder and Honorary President Peter Townsend (Karl Weiss)

From 1970 CPAG regularly ran fringe meetings at all party conferences. Field quickly became the public face of CPAG, with strong support from Peter Townsend who was a very active chair of the executive committee from 1969 to 1989 and then Honorary President until his death in 2009. He was also a highly articulate public spokesperson for CPAG.

In March 1970, Field and colleagues met the Shadow Chancellor, Iain MacLeod, who surprised them by promising that, if the Conservatives won the election, they would raise family allowances and introduce the 'claw-back' principle. Heath appeared to support this, but MacLeod died shortly after the election and the new Chancellor, Anthony Barber, announced a means-tested family income supplement (FIS) to help poorer families with a wage earner, a major policy departure. CPAG was highly critical of the Conservative turnaround. Field wrote a severe letter to Heath accompanied by a press release: 'Has Heath ratted on the poor?'. Sir Keith Joseph became Social Services Secretary and became notorious for describing poverty as a condition transmitted through families down the generations, rather than as a product of wider socio-economic conditions.

As CPAG predicted, take-up of FIS was low (only 50 per cent) and it extended the operation of the 'poverty trap', as it became known, following an article of that name by Field and London School of Economics academic David Piachaud in the *New Statesman* in 1971. This was the situation whereby many families earning low wages and dependent upon means-tested benefits found that a small increase in earnings left them little better or even worse off because, as well as paying income tax and national insurance contributions, entitlement to means-tested benefits, such as FIS, rent rebates and allowances, rate rebates and free

school meals, reduced or ceased altogether. CPAG proposed therefore that school meals should be free for all children, but it believed that the only way to eliminate the problem was to cease to rely on means-tested support. Field and Piachaud pointed out that the poverty trap ensured that trade union pay demands did not reduce poverty and urged the unions to demand increased family allowances along with higher pay. This won support for CPAG from influential trade unionists who then used the poverty trap argument in wage negotiations.



Between 1970 and 1972 the number of CPAG branches grew five-fold.

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CPAG also attacked the 1972 Housing Finance Act, which raised council house rents and introduced means-tested rent rebates, which they predicted – correctly – would have low take-up and increase poverty at a time of rising unemployment and rising prices. In January 1973, means-tested rent rebates were extended, as rent allowances, to unfurnished privately rented and housing association tenancies, with similar effects.

Between 1970 and 1972 the number of CPAG branches grew five-fold – perhaps an expression of opposition to the Conservative government’s social security measures – and they received increased requests for welfare rights advice.

The Citizens’ Rights Office (CRO) quickly, and deservedly as a unique institution at the time, became nationally well known and respected. A key role was to provide evidence and case examples to support campaigning efforts. Yet, as problems of poverty grew, it was almost overwhelmed by appeals for help. It alone provided free legal support for appeals against decisions on means-tested benefits. This aroused fears that this was coming to dominate CPAG’s work, displacing the policy campaigns on which Field wished to focus, and that the CRO was taking over work best delegated to branches.

In 1975, Weir left to work for Shelter. Henry Hodge, then Deputy Director of CPAG, took over responsibility for all branches, while Ruth Lister became Assistant Director. Two new welfare rights officers were appointed. CPAG staff had expanded to eight full-time and one part-time workers, but it still had too few to meet all the demands. It had to guard against being overstretched, pulled in too many directions by the proliferating pressures on poor families. The CRO greatly assisted CPAG’s precarious funding by bringing in fees from welfare rights courses. These supplemented membership fees (there were about 2,000 members through the 1970s) and the steady income from publications, although CPAG, like very many voluntary organisations, needed funding from foundations such as Rowntree if it was to respond adequately to all the demands on its skills and resources.

In 1972, the Heath government proposed something new: ‘tax credits’ – payments through the tax system to low-paid families – to replace family allowances, FIS and child tax allowances, designed to avoid the difficulties identified with the means-tested FIS. This was opposed by CPAG and other groups because the credits would mainly have gone to fathers, not mothers, and would have excluded many of the poorest families whose incomes were below the tax threshold or who received supplementary benefits. After detailed consideration of these and other objections, by mid-1973 the government was still determined to go ahead with the credits, although it responded to pressure from CPAG and others by conceding that they should be paid to the mother. Before it could take it forward, the Conservatives lost the February 1974 election amid the bitter miners’ strike.

# SIX CHILD BENEFIT ACHIEVED

Labour returned to government. The Chancellor, Denis Healey, almost immediately scrapped the proposed tax credit scheme, on grounds of cost and under strong pressure from the poverty lobby and the unions.

Poverty persisted through the 1970s due particularly to high and growing unemployment, for the first time since the war, and rising prices, particularly of fuel following the 1973 'oil shock'. This created strong pressure from the CPAG branches for action. CPAG responded by demonstrating that unemployment was becoming the major cause of poverty, leading to Frank Field and Ruth Lister's report *Wasted Labour: a call for action on unemployment* in 1978.

The campaign called on the government to start a debate on returning to full employment. The growing number of single parents, mainly mothers, was another reason why increasing numbers of families were living in poverty. CPAG welcomed the report of the Finer Committee on One-parent Families in 1974, appointed by Labour in 1969 in response to the growing numbers of such families in need and the pressure to help them. The Finer Report recommended higher family allowances for all plus a new weekly benefit, general maintenance allowance, for single-parent families, as recommended by Margaret Wynn, a founder member of CPAG, who in 1964 had published *Fatherless Families*, one of the first detailed studies of their plight. The Finer Report coincided with the post-oil shock economic crisis and there was no immediate response from the government.

A further issue through the 1970s was the falling income tax threshold, which drew ever more lower paid workers into taxation, cancelling out any gains they might have made from increased benefits. This strengthened the case for substituting a single child benefit for family allowances and child tax allowances. This was now a central campaigning issue for CPAG. It was designed to increase taxation of the better off and raise the incomes of low-paid families.

Labour returned to office and pledged to introduce new benefits for families, in response to trade union, as much as CPAG, pressure. CPAG soon believed they had won a victory: in 1975 the Supplementary Benefits Commission announced that it would abolish the wage-stop. Due to the proliferation of means-tested benefits, including family income supplement, the number of families affected by the wage-stop had shrunk to 6,000 from 35,600 in 1970. In the same year, Barbara Castle, Minister of Health and Social Security, introduced the Child Benefit Act, replacing family allowances and child tax allowances with a new child benefit, as CPAG had urged. But it did not specify a starting date or the level of benefits.

Then, in 1976, Harold Wilson unexpectedly resigned and was succeeded by James Callaghan. The new Prime Minister was a staunch opponent of child benefit, which he believed would reduce workers' take-home income by transferring tax allowances, gained mainly by fathers, to child benefit paid to mothers and further increase already insistent trade union pay demands (fuelled by inflation). He sacked Castle. Her successor, David Ennals, announced the indefinite postponement of child benefit, with the mild consolation of a new £1 per week family allowance for first children. Then, minutes of the acrimonious discussions of child benefit in a much divided Cabinet were leaked and made public in an anonymous article in *New Society*: 'Killing a commitment: the Cabinet vs the children'. This caused such uproar that it was reprinted the following week and Frank Field was revealed as the author. A leak enquiry failed to identify the whistleblower, but it was later revealed, in his posthumous memoir, as Malcolm Wicks, then a civil servant and later a Labour MP.<sup>1</sup>

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor still tried to resist a persistent CPAG campaign: 'All children worse off under Labour' stated a CPAG submission to the government. The demand to implement child benefit was supported by Labour backbenchers, in a letter to *The Times* from leading social policy professors and a resolution of the Church of England synod, by women's organisations and, perhaps most importantly, by leaders of major trade unions. Callaghan gave in and announced the phasing in of child benefit from 1977, to reach £4 per week per child by 1979.

CPAG was now satisfied and pleased to have achieved its goal. Through the 1970s it worked on this and other campaigns with other groups, including Shelter, One Parent Families, Age Concern, Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Heating Action Group. By this time also, some new organisations had emerged that were closely associated with CPAG, including the Low Pay Unit and the Family Rights Group.

#### Notes

1. M Wicks, *My Life*, Matador, 2013, Chapter 5

# SEVEN DEFENDING CHILD BENEFIT

In 1979, Labour lost the next election to the Conservatives, led by Margaret Thatcher. Frank Field left CPAG and was elected Labour MP for Birkenhead. Ruth Lister succeeded him as Director.

Throughout the 1970s, CPAG had campaigned hard, on its own and with other groups, with some real success in persuading governments to implement some, though by no means all, of its key goals. Through the 1980s it campaigned, alone and with others, to defend and preserve these gains and prevent the severe erosion by Conservative governments of universalist social security in favour of 'selectivism' (the new, more positive-sounding, term for means testing, espoused by a government very sensitive to language: Thatcher banned the words 'poverty' and 'inequality' from official discourse). There was some concern in CPAG that its work was being driven by responses to government policy and the defence of the existing system, rather than by its own forward-looking strategies, but in the circumstances of severe, persistent, attacks on existing benefits this was hard to avoid.

The new government began as it intended to continue. The first Conservative Budget in 1980 froze child benefit for a year, followed, in the same year, by two Social Security Acts. The first removed the obligation to link long-term benefits, including child benefit and pensions, to wage or price levels, whichever was higher, and linked them only to prices, which normally rose more slowly. The real value of benefits deteriorated thereafter. The second piece of legislation abolished earnings-related supplements to short-term national insurance benefits, restricted supplementary benefits for strikers and their families, transferred responsibility for paying the first eight weeks of sickness benefit to employers (as statutory sick pay, later extended to 28 weeks) and forbade payment for the first four days' sickness. Also in 1980, an Education Act abolished minimum nutritional standards for school meals and the obligation of local authorities to supply free meals, except for families receiving family income supplement or supplementary benefits. In the same bleak year, prescription charges were increased, while take-up of exemptions remained very low.



Housing benefit was introduced to replace rent and rate rebates and rent allowances from 1982/83. It was to be administered by local authorities, replacing Supplementary Benefits Commission (SBC) rent allowances to claimants. This could have amounted to a welcome reform of a complex system, but increasingly stringent means testing left poorer families worse off (if they claimed, and many did not) – and the government rejected an independent appeals system, as existed for SBC claimants, leaving appeals to be made to committees of local councillors who administered the system. CPAG estimated that two million claimants would be worse off as a result of the change. There were also widespread, severe administrative problems due to the flawed design of the new scheme.

The right to appeal was increasingly restricted for benefit claimants through the 1980s, which reduced CPAG's capacity to support clients, centrally and in the branches. To make things worse, throughout the decade, mounting unemployment and inflation and still growing numbers of single-parent families all exposed ever more families to the risk of poverty. Also, there was a growing problem of debt, as the use of credit cards and of high interest loan companies by desperate people increased. Meanwhile, taxes on business and the rich were reduced, while the tax threshold fell, bringing still more low-income families into the income tax system. Incomes at the top end of the distribution rose while the safety net was withdrawn from those on the lowest incomes. Inequality between rich and poor, having narrowed since 1945, now greatly increased.

CPAG lobbied and tried to mobilise the media against these and further changes, but it encountered – mainly, though not only, in the right wing press – support for means-testing child benefit and other universal benefits, which the government was known to favour. But Thatcher's approach to social security and other welfare services, such as the NHS, was not universally popular on the Conservative back- (and even front-) benches. Ruth Lister, as Director, was soon in contact with sympathetic Conservative MPs, including, usefully for the future, John Major. Some of them (not, as far as we are aware, including Major) accepted briefings to oppose government proposals until Thatcher's demise as premier in 1990. CPAG was even asked by a Department of Health and Social Security minister to brief the department on opposition to the Treasury's determination to cut the real value of supplementary benefit. CPAG's influence waned as time went on and Thatcher expunged the 'wets' who opposed her from their ministerial positions. Nevertheless, without the well-briefed criticism, the cuts would certainly have been even fiercer.

CPAG also had support in the Lords, from representatives of all parties and none, and on the Labour backbenches, though Labour in the 1980s was weak and divided, on welfare policy as on much else. CPAG sought not to be identified with any of Labour's factions. After the right-wing Social Democrats split from Labour in 1981 they announced in a paper, *Attacking Poverty* (1983), their conversion to 'selectivity', despite their leader, David Owen's, past support for CPAG. They claimed that they could solve the problems of take-up and stigma with modern technology, as no

government in the world had so far achieved. This was never put to the test, but CPAG calculated that their proposals would actually reduce take-up.

There were more important struggles against successive Conservative measures. In 1984, Norman Fowler, Minister of Health and Social Security, instituted reviews including of housing benefit, supplementary benefit and child benefit. Fran Bennett (Acting Director of CPAG while Ruth Lister was on leave), with representatives of other organisations, gave evidence in support of improved provision, despite believing that the speedy consultation was a cover for further cuts to government spending. Concerned about Conservative plans, in late 1985 CPAG formed the Save Child Benefit campaign with, ultimately, 70 other charities, unions, church and other organisations, local councils (especially in Scotland), Women's Institutes and Mother's Union branches, with cross-party backbench support. They were assisted by a group of female stage, screen and TV stars who presented Margaret Thatcher with a Mother's Day card, designed by a six-year-old, with the message 'Give all Mothers a Happy Mother's Day – Save Child Benefit'. Although the campaign failed to stop the Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, freezing child benefit for three years from 1986, it survived.



Actress Jean Boht helps present Margaret Thatcher with a Mother's Day card, asking her to save child benefit (Karl Weiss)

The outcome of the Fowler reviews was the Social Security Act 1986, which claimed, not for the first or last time, to be the greatest overhaul of the social security system since Beveridge, and to be simplifying an increasingly complex system while increasing incentives to work and self-support, which were assumed to be absent from existing arrangements. The Act abolished family income supplement, replacing it with family credit, to be introduced in 1988. This would be calculated on earnings net of tax and national insurance and paid mainly to fathers through the pay packet. Also 'availability for work' tests were tightened: mothers, for example, were required to make 'immediate' childcare arrangements if offered work, which was often impossible; disabled people who claimed inability to work faced tougher scrutiny. Supplementary benefit was replaced by income support. This was another means-tested benefit, but lacked the previous discretionary 'additional requirements'. These were replaced by flat-rate additions to income support. Single payments for one-off needs that low-paid families could not afford were transferred to a locally administered, cash-limited, social fund from which local officials could meet approved claims for maternity and funeral expenses or community care on leaving hospital, although items such as bedding, furniture, clothing and special dietary needs could now normally only be funded by loans from the fund. Take-up was low. A further Social Security Act in 1988 caused half a million school students to lose their entitlement to free meals. Some gained, some lost from all the changes, but they did not reduce poverty or increase employment and the costs of social security did not diminish, mainly due to rising unemployment.

As the cuts and problems of deprivation multiplied, CPAG was pulled in still more directions. It opposed the payment of family credit mainly to fathers, gaining the support of some Tory backbenchers, peers and women's organisations, all well briefed by CPAG. The government gave way and family credit was paid to the

'main carer', mostly mothers. CPAG and 14 other organisations, including local authority associations and charities for older and disabled people, formed the Social Security Consortium, supported by Labour and trade unions, to oppose the legislation more broadly, though with little success. The Church of England, along with other churches at this time, was increasingly critical of growing poverty and inequality. In 1987, an anti-poverty campaign formed by CPAG, the Low Pay Unit and the ecumenical Church Action on Poverty (formed in 1982) was launched by the Bishop of Birmingham with the actor, Judi Dench. CPAG also exposed the poverty and discrimination experienced by black and minority ethnic groups, including discriminatory treatment by Supplementary Benefits Commission officials. Its 1985 report, *Passport to Benefits: racism in social security* by Paul Gordon and Anne Newnham, among other activities, challenged, like a great deal of other research, the belief that 'immigrants' disproportionately used welfare services, including social security benefits and healthcare. CPAG also continued the campaign begun in the 1970s against the routine disconnection of people unable to pay fuel bills.

In 1988, a nationwide network, Poverty Watch, was formed by CPAG in response to the evidence of growing poverty and inequality. It aimed to establish contacts in every constituency to monitor evidence of local poverty and to inform and lobby MPs and local media, seeking to influence policy from the ground up. By late 1988, it had contacts in over 300 constituencies. In 1989 CPAG organised Britain: a Fairer Future, a week of co-ordinated activity at national and branch level designed to raise the awareness of politicians and the public about continuing poverty in families in prosperous Britain and its blighting effect on children's lives and futures.

Cambridge branch raises awareness of poverty during CPAG's Fairer Future week





Campaigning against the poll tax

There was a national launch at a well-attended conference at City University, London, and many branches held their own events. CPAG published a Declaration, stating 'It isn't the poor who have failed – it is society which has failed the poor', which was endorsed by a long list of public figures representing the arts, politics and faith groups, among others, including Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Sir Richard Attenborough, Emma Thompson, Beryl Bainbridge, Lenny Henry, Judi Dench, Sir Alex Ferguson, Brian Cox, Glenda Jackson, Benjamin Zephaniah, the Bishops of Salisbury, Manchester and Liverpool, the Archbishop of York, senior figures in the Methodist and Baptist Churches, representatives of the Jesuits and of the Council of Reform and Liberal Rabbis, Rabbi Julia Neuberger and the Chair of the Council of Mosques.

Between 1988 and 1990 CPAG was very active in the campaign against the poll tax, which was Thatcher's downfall. It was particularly concerned that the shift from a tax levied on property to one on individuals would especially hit larger low-income families and that the system would ensure that poorer districts, where needs for services were greatest, would have least revenue. The pamphlet *A Tax on All the People: the poll tax* by Carey Oppenheim summed this up.

Throughout the 1980s, the Citizens' Rights Office (CRO) and other CPAG staff played an important role in briefing sympathetic politicians of all parties on the implications of policy changes, while continuing to train welfare rights officers, social workers and lawyers to deal with them and publishing relevant information. The knowledge about claimants' lives and experiences of the benefits system gained from cases referred to CPAG formed a basis of its campaigns. As unemployment grew, the CRO assisted more benefit appeals by unemployed people, while appeals on other issues shrank as cuts took effect. The number of branches waxed and waned and probably fell through the decade,



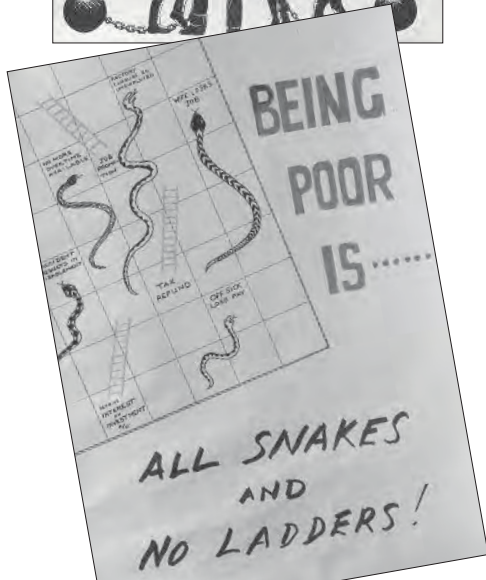
though many transformed into local welfare rights services. Some were determinedly active, some in closer contact with the centre than others, continuing to play their local information role while assisting individuals in need and resisting cuts.

A persistent, growing, concern for CPAG at all levels in the 1980s was the negative popular perception of poor people, which seemed to be spreading even further than in the 1970s, fuelled by representations of the ‘undeserving poor’ in the press and actively supported by government rhetoric. Since 1945, surveys had indicated stronger support for pensions and the NHS than for unemployment benefits, and that family allowances/child benefit were especially unpopular. Pensioners and sick people were perceived as ‘deserving’ of public support; families and unemployed people less so. If children were poor, it was represented as the parents’ fault, for, it was asserted, family size should, and could, be planned according to family income, as the government also suggested, as though unpredictable crises could not afflict careful families. A survey in 1983 found that 57 per cent of respondents agreed that ‘Britain’s welfare system removes the incentive for people to help themselves’. ‘Scrounger phobia’ mounted, along with the conviction that fraud was rife in the system, despite strong evidence to the contrary.

CPAG sought further means to counter these negative views, which so conflicted with its experience of the realities of poverty and the benefits system. In 1983 it tried to establish a working group of journalists to present a more positive image, but only two turned up to the meeting. Instead, it tried a public education project, starting with an advert in *The Times* (it aimed for *The Sun*, but it was too expensive) headed ‘Children Don’t Have a Vote’, which sought to persuade politicians and the media to be more understanding about child poverty, but with little success. The campaign included, in 1984/85, an exhibition, *Beyond Poor Images*, which travelled around the country displaying posters (following a competition to design posters challenging commonly held myths about poverty) and words describing poverty and inequality in contemporary Britain.

CPAG faced recurrent challenges from critics in the media, politics and academic life who were unwilling to accept that ‘relative’ poverty, as originally defined by Peter Townsend, was ‘real’ poverty. In the early 1980s, responding to changes to supplementary benefit payments and to official measurements of household incomes, after consultation with academic experts, CPAG adopted the measure of poverty used for official statistics, covering those on incomes below 60 per cent of median income. By this measure, child poverty doubled between 1979 and 1990, from about 15 per cent to almost 30 per cent.

But its activities were still restricted by a lack of funds and staff to pursue all the urgent needs it identified. CPAG was widely respected, but its cause was not popular enough to attract large donations and it could not afford a large fundraising staff. Organisations perceived as primarily about campaigning found it harder to attract donations than those focused on providing services. CPAG, of course, provided indispensable services to many needy people, but this was not



**Beyond Poor exhibition posters**  
(Barry Marsden)

widely recognised. Financial problems recurred through the 1980s, holding back staff pay, which was based on a flat structure with no automatic increments, and also improvements to the poor, cramped working conditions in Macklin Street, where, to make things worse, the rent was rising. At the end of the decade, it moved to rather better, cheaper quarters in Bath Street near Old Street in east-central London. Still, CPAG was kept going by income from publications, especially the highly successful *National Welfare Benefits Handbook* (part of a long series that continues to the present, providing invaluable advice on all forms of benefits), welfare rights courses, plus some grants, including from the indispensable Rowntree Trust, the Northmoor Trust and the Greater London Council, before the government terminated it in 1986. Four new posts were created in 1988 when finances improved a little.



Child poverty doubled between 1979 and 1990, from about 15 per cent to almost 30 per cent.

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It was hard, but CPAG carried on. In 1989 it produced a strategy paper on policy, listing its priorities, to help keep it focused in difficult times. These were: informing a wide audience about the scale of poverty and inequality; campaigning for alternative policies aimed at the prevention of poverty and reduction of inequality; and ensuring rights to benefits for the broadest range of groups possible. Among the campaigning issues throughout the 1990s were: improved childcare, free or at low cost, including after school and in school holidays; a return to a full employment policy, since unemployment was now the main cause of poverty among families with children; and a national minimum wage, rather than means-tested supplements to resolve another major cause of poverty, low pay.

# EIGHT DEFENDING UNIVERSALISM

In 1990 John Major replaced Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. He had a good relationship with CPAG and encouraged it by announcing his support for child benefit and increasing payments to first children, followed in 1991 by further increases and index linking.

The Save Child Benefit coalition believed it had won and changed its name to the Coalition for Child Benefit. But child benefit was uprated only very slowly in the remaining years of the Conservative government to 1997. Relations with ministers and officials remained cordial and CPAG was consulted, and evidently respected, on technical issues, but it had less contact with Conservative backbenchers than before and less evident impact on social security debates and policies.

Severe financial problems still held it back at the beginning of the 1990s. Staff efforts were directed to raising money, with some success to which training and publications continued to make a major contribution, though finance remained a problem throughout the decade. A persistent battle of the 1990s, despite the initial optimism, was the defence of universal child benefit against the continuing, growing belief within both Conservative and Labour parties, promoted in the media, that universality was outdated, overdue for replacement by more 'modern' 'targeting', as means testing was now known in political circles. A fashionable solution was integration of the tax and benefit systems, known as 'negative income tax', as the tax threshold fell ever lower and more poorer people were subject to direct taxation.

The argument for 'targeting' grew stronger in the Labour Party following its poor performance in the 1992 election. It felt it had been severely undermined by Conservative attacks on what were represented as its 'tax and spend' policies, including the proposals in the 1992 Shadow Budget to extend universal social security. These had been influenced by discussions with CPAG. In response, in 1994 CPAG produced and publicised *The Modern Case Against Means-Testing* for the Commission on Social Justice, the review of social and economic policies initiated by Labour's then leader, John Smith. This was established as an

independent body by the left-of-centre Institute for Public Policy Research, whose Deputy Director was future Labour Cabinet minister, Patricia Hewitt. Another future Labour minister, David Miliband, was secretary of the Commission and Ruth Lister, now a Professor at Loughborough University, having left CPAG in 1988 (later, from 2011, Honorary President of CPAG, and also from 2011, a member of the House of Lords as Baroness Lister of Burtersett) was a member.

The Commission was initially tempted by the idea of negative income tax and withdrawing child benefit from high earners. But, in the end, it recommended:<sup>1</sup>

*... an intelligent welfare state able to help people negotiate unpredictable changes within both family and workplace. The welfare state must enable people to achieve self-improvement and self-support. It must offer a hand-up, not just a hand-out.*

It had been persuaded that this was not best achieved by means testing:

*Means-testing, the Deregulators' panacea, will not work: means-tested benefits are not claimed, they are expensive to administer, they encourage dependence on benefits by trapping people on welfare, they penalise saving and they provide disincentives for women to take paid work.*

Instead, it recommended much that CPAG had long advocated: a minimum income and a universal 'modern social insurance system', updating the post-Beveridge system, with, while this was under construction, improvements to means-tested benefits designed to make work pay.<sup>2</sup>



## Legal test cases became an even bigger part of CPAG's work in the 1990s.

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The Conservatives were harder to persuade, and CPAG spent much, probably most, of its time until 1997 challenging continual modification and tightening of the social security benefits system. Much energy was spent on one-off campaigns on specific issues, often co-operating with other organisations. The work of the Benefits Agency, created in 1991 to take over administration of social security payments, reinforced CPAG's opposition to means testing. Take-up remained low and the Agency's inefficient administration was criticised by the National Audit Office. In consequence, more claimants needed help and the Citizens' Rights Office (CRO) advice and appeals work grew further. Partly as a result of the benefit changes, test cases became an even larger part of CPAG's work in the 1990s, with more cases taken to the European courts. Successful outcomes provided ammunition for campaigning and lobbying for policy change.



Early in 1991, two cases backed by CPAG were heard by the European Court of Justice, having been referred by the Social Security Commissioners. In the case of a woman who had been ruled ineligible for severe disablement allowance, CPAG successfully argued that UK social security law breached the European Union (EU) Directive requiring equal treatment of women and men in social security systems. When this allowance was introduced in 1984, it perpetuated the discrimination inherent in the abolished non-contributory invalidity pension whereby, in order to qualify, married or cohabiting women had to prove that they were incapable of performing both paid work and 'normal household duties'. There was no equivalent test for men. Almost 300,000 women who had failed to qualify for invalidity pension because of this test were also disqualified from severe disablement allowance. The European Court of Justice ruled that discrimination had been perpetuated in the new law, contrary to the Directive.

Also in 1991, CPAG successfully argued before the Court the case of a British man who lived and worked in France who had been paralysed in 1980 following a car crash in France. He had returned to Britain in 1981 and been awarded invalidity benefit and mobility allowance. In 1984 he returned to France and the allowance was withdrawn. The Court accepted CPAG's argument that the withdrawal contravened the EU regulation, designed to protect the rights of migrant workers, that prevented the Department of Social Security taking away his allowance just because he moved to another member state.<sup>3</sup>

Appeals work became all the more important when the government introduced a rule in 1990 that appeal outcomes in social security cases did not set precedents. Fran Bennett, who succeeded Ruth Lister as Director from 1988 to 1993, wrote frequent, hard-hitting, letters to the press on these and other issues, including on the need for good, low-cost, publicly provided childcare and the exclusion of childcare costs from means testing, as it had been before 1988. Here again, she appealed to the precedent of EU Directives.

Campaigns in the 1990s included continuing the opposition, shared with other organisations, to cuts to disability allowances. There were 60 changes to disability benefits between 1980 and 1993, including, from 1990, tougher medical tests for incapacity to work. These led to several test cases. In 1991/92 the CRO also assisted growing numbers of people in mortgage arrears. People on low incomes had been encouraged by the Conservative governments to become home owners, including by buying their council homes at reduced prices, but many of them now could not afford the mortgages and repossessions peaked. CPAG also challenged the shift in 1996 from unemployment benefit and income support to jobseeker's allowance, with accompanying cuts, as unemployment rose. And branches were especially active in exposing the effects of the discretionary social fund on families with children, who found it hard to get grants and faced great strain if forced to make loan repayments. Centrally and locally, CPAG lobbied MPs for increased resources for the fund and challenged decisions through test cases.

Cambridge branch campaigns against the social fund



It lobbied with other organisations, including the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, One Parent Families, Citizens Advice Bureaux and Barnardo's, against the Child Support Act 1991, implemented in 1993. This was one of Thatcher's legacies, pushed through Parliament in a hurry before her demise and poorly thought through and administered, as CPAG had predicted throughout. It was designed to increase pressure on 'feckless fathers', who Thatcher believed abounded, to support their children from previous partnerships, to increase child maintenance payments and reduce tax-funded benefits. Its main effect was to increase pressure on, and risk penalising, the incomes of single mothers and their children without cutting costs – indeed, it made massive losses for many years. Meetings of representatives of CPAG and their allies with the head of the Child Support Agency and the minister brought small concessions, but the problems continued until the Labour government which followed introduced improvements to the scheme, including introducing a simpler formula and allowing more payments to be disregarded, finally benefiting children, together with improvements to the process of enforcing payment.

CPAG and its allies were concerned too about intensified public denigration of single mothers at this time, greater than for many decades, encouraged by ministers, most notoriously Peter Lilley's intoning at the Conservative Party conference in 1992 that he:

*'... had a little list  
of benefit offenders who I'll soon be rooting out...  
young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the waiting list.  
And dads who won't support the kids of ladies they have kissed.  
And I haven't even mentioned all those sponging socialists.'*

Still central to CPAG's work was the publication of much valued handbooks to inform administrators and claimants about the proliferating, constantly changing, array of benefits and other issues. A handbook published in 1996 on the growing problem of debt received extensive, favourable media coverage. The CRO continued to complement these publications with training courses. Other publications, including the *Cost of a Child* pamphlet published in the run-up to the 1994 Budget, gained huge publicity. Handbooks and other publications continued to be a major source of income through the cash-strapped 1990s.

Branches seem to have dwindled further in the 1990s and there were long-standing tensions between some branches and the central office about their relationship and the perceived lack of a co-ordinated campaign strategy. Some branches felt they had too little support and lacked campaign materials, including factsheets and leaflets, often because the centre was short of funds and staff. Seventeen branches were active in 1996, compared with 45 in 1989, when the post of Campaigns Officer, which had previously provided much support to branches, was frozen. However, some branches remained very active (for example, York and Oxford), supporting the Save Child Benefit campaign, still informing local people about welfare rights, assisting with their appeals and providing test cases, researching and briefing the centre with information about the impact of government policies on families. In 1990, the Oxford branch organised a conference to bring the branches and centre together to discuss their relationship and strategy.

In 1999, following devolution, CPAG in Scotland was formed as an additional office, rather than a branch, initially assisted by Lottery funding. It soon grew strong and effective. From 2001, it took the lead in a campaign to persuade the Scottish Parliament to provide universal free school meals. Following a successful pilot scheme in 2007/08, in 2014 the Scottish government announced that from January 2015 all children in Primary 1, 2 and 3 classes would be entitled to healthy, free school meals. Since 2006, CPAG in Scotland has also campaigned with increasing numbers of other groups in Scotland, with growing intensity over time, offering constructive alternatives to the changes to social security and other welfare services by successive Westminster governments.

The demands of campaigning on multiple fronts continued to put the limited funding and staff of CPAG under strain. Communication with the media was vital and was maintained as far as possible, but it lacked a press officer, except for one year, in 1994, when the post was funded by an anonymous donation. Though CPAG collaborated with other organisations, it sometimes felt in competition with them: for funds, and because more organisations were now also providing advice, training and handbooks, following CPAG's successful lead. Also the wide range of campaigns relevant to CPAG's mission again aroused concern about whether it was losing its focus. Some believed it was becoming unclear whether it was mainly concerned with child poverty or with the many issues causing poverty in families with children – not that they were easily distinguished. There was also concern, again, that it was becoming too reactive to government policies, rather than taking initiatives, and was losing ground and visibility in campaigning.

Ashington branch participates in CPAG's Save Child Benefit campaign



Frances Curran MSP shows her support for CPAG in Scotland's call for universal free school meals



All these issues, and the funding problem, continued under Sally Witcher when she took over as Director (1993 to 1998), as they had for her predecessor. Change was in progress amid a vigorous ongoing debate among CPAG staff about the future. This led to a staff reorganisation, which created a clear management structure in place of the previous flat, non-hierarchical system, with the intention of giving the staff and Director more support. In 1995, it was agreed that the focus of policy and campaign work should be 'income poverty as it affects families with children', informed by policy, research and advice work. In 1997, a Policy Development Forum was established, a small group tasked to develop and advise on policy, and to assist the development of strategy. Branches were encouraged to strengthen their links with people who had experienced poverty, including young people, in order to counter criticism in the media and elsewhere that CPAG involved poor people too little in its activities, and to use this experience to inform policymaking. CPAG also had to counter persistent attacks in the media and questions from politicians suggesting that it exaggerated the extent of poverty, still questioning the concept of relative poverty and suggesting that serious poverty had been eliminated in Britain. Defending and defining the concept of relative poverty was an ongoing issue.

In 1996, for financial and practical reasons, CPAG moved again, buying offices in White Lion Street, Islington, North London, after successfully raising funds for the new building. Financial problems persisted, but now CPAG was in better shape, with structures in place to guide policymaking and campaigns.

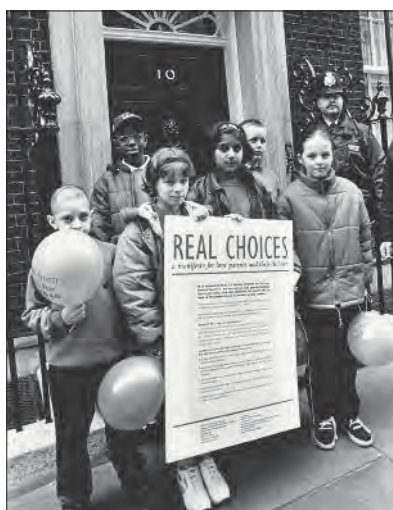
#### Notes

1. *Social Justice: strategies for national renewal*, Report of the Commission on Social Justice, 1994, pp7–8
2. See note 1, pp8–9
3. *CPAG Annual Report 1990/91*, p11

# NINE ENDING CHILD POVERTY?

Following the sudden death of John Smith in 1994, with whom relations were cordial, those with the New Labour followers of his successor, Tony Blair, were more complex. Some of his supporters regarded universalism as 'old' Labour, failing somehow to encourage the 'modern' New Labour ideal of 'aspiration'.

Nevertheless, in 1995 Blair mandated Frank Field, still a Labour MP, to 'think the unthinkable' about welfare. Field went on later that year to recommend a modernised universal social insurance scheme, among other changes. This must have been unthinkable, since it did not become party policy. CPAG believed that New Labour lacked a clear set of social policies as it approached, and decisively won, the 1997 election, and CPAG needed to think about how to influence this new Labour Party.



CPAG's manifesto for lone parents is presented to Downing Street (Brenda Prince/Format)

By 1997, at least one in four children in the UK were living in poverty compared with one in ten 20 years earlier and CPAG was anxious for Labour to reverse the trend. CPAG joined the many critics of the cuts to lone-parent benefits planned by the Conservatives and implemented by Labour, which could only make child poverty worse. These were later compensated, over several years, by other benefit changes, but this was not evident at the time. CPAG applauded the introduction of the minimum wage in 1999, having advocated it for years, but it continued throughout Labour's time in office, until 2010, to point out the relative disadvantages experienced by single parents, unemployed workers, disabled parents and children and minority ethnic families.

In 1998 Martin Barnes took over as Director. Soon after, in March 1999, in a lecture to commemorate William Beveridge at Toynbee Hall, Blair made a wholly unexpected announcement:

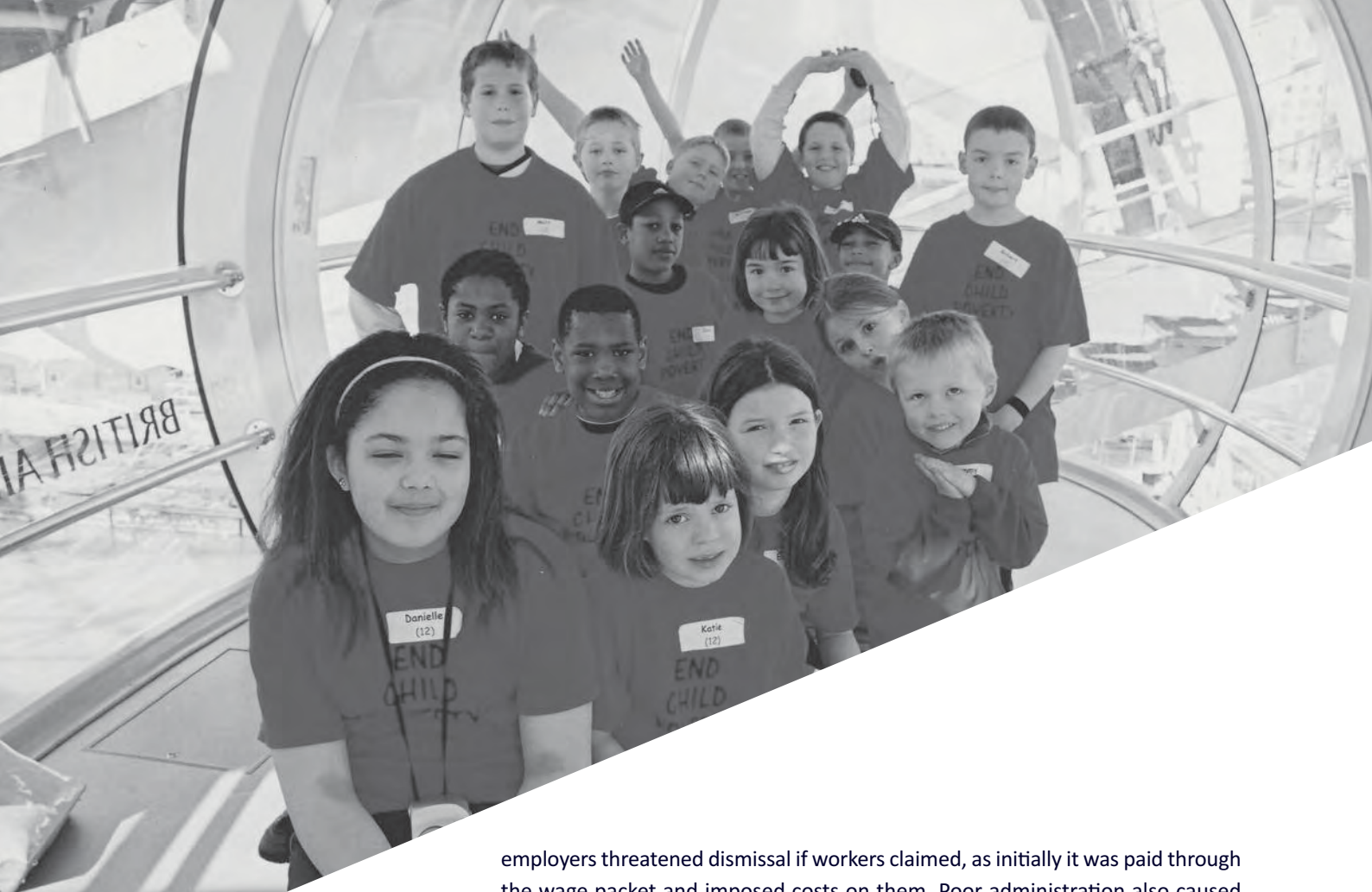
*'Our historic aim [is] that ours is the first generation to end child poverty forever ... it is a 20-year mission, but I believe it can be done.'*

He promised to end child poverty by 2020. It was the most outspoken commitment by a government to eliminate child poverty since the foundation of CPAG. His motives for making this announcement at this time were, and are, wholly unclear. We do not know whether he was aware that CPAG was effectively founded at Toynbee Hall. He was, perhaps, influenced by recent joint Treasury and London School of Economics research showing that poor children had vastly reduced opportunities for success in education or work. The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, unlike Blair, was already known to be committed to ending child poverty, but he and his civil servants were also taken by surprise by the pledge and had no plans in place to implement it.<sup>1</sup> It received only muted press coverage, making the front page only of the Labour-supporting *Daily Mirror*.

Nevertheless, supporting disadvantaged children through their earliest years became one of New Labour's most effective missions, mainly due to Brown's efforts: indeed, planning for such measures had already started in the Treasury.<sup>2</sup> He announced the introduction of Sure Start centres in 1998, to be run by local authorities, designed to improve outcomes for young children and their families, especially the neediest. CPAG supported Sure Start from the start for its contribution to lessening the ill effects of family poverty. It carried on campaigning for maximum support for poorer children at school and in their earlier years, to improve their opportunities, including improved childcare and free – and healthy – meals for all primary school children, much of which Labour implemented.

CPAG was as surprised as anyone by Blair's pledge, but it issued a press release welcoming it. Gordon Brown's two-year commitment to keep to Conservative budget restraints was coming to an end. Barnes met Brown shortly before the 1999 Budget and put the case for uprating child benefit in line with inflation or earnings, whichever was higher. Brown responded: 'That does not sound very ambitious'.<sup>3</sup> He and his civil servants committed to meeting the 2020 target and later Budgets contributed to that end, to varying degrees. In autumn 1999, he contributed an article to *Poverty*, 'A scar on the nation's soul', outlining a four-point plan to implement the pledge: increasing child benefit, income support and tax credits; investing in public services; co-ordinating with local and community and voluntary associations through Sure Start and the New Deal for Communities to assist urban renewal; and further investment in education. Much of the plan was fulfilled.

CPAG and other voluntary organisations had greater access to ministers and officials under New Labour than under any other government. In October 1999, Brown transformed family credit into working families tax credit (WFTC). While constructing this, Treasury civil servants realised how little they knew about low-income families and consulted CPAG. They found the advice so balanced and useful that contact continued thereafter. WFTC was a generous scheme, one of a succession initiated by Brown, but the non-take-up problem remained: in 2000/01 over half a million of those entitled did not claim. Take-up of child benefit was 98 per cent. As ever, some were unaware of their rights; others risked losing other means-tested benefits, such as free school meals, because the credits counted as income, hence some of the poorest families gained least; some



CPAG joins End Child Poverty at its launch on the London Eye

employers threatened dismissal if workers claimed, as initially it was paid through the wage packet and imposed costs on them. Poor administration also caused under- and over-payment of the credits. And they embodied another weakness of tax credits against which CPAG had always protested: they were paid through the pay packet, mainly to men, and were less reliably channelled into family needs than payments to mothers. One recipient told CPAG:

*'Tax credits are difficult to apply for and you always worry you're going to lose them. Child benefit is paid into my account every month, so there is always something there for the children.'*

In 2001, CPAG joined an End Child Poverty coalition with other leading children's organisations to press the government to fulfil Blair's pledge.

It was still concerned that the government might choose a means-tested route and focused on maintaining universal child benefit as essential for the elimination of child poverty. With the End Child Poverty coalition, CPAG expressed concerns about flaws in WFTC and campaigned for change. In 2003, the system was much improved by dividing WFTC in two: working tax credit (WTC) and a new child tax credit (CTC), which amalgamated means-tested benefits and credits for children, at considerable cost. Child benefit continued alongside the new system. This reduced the complications, delays and interruptions to earnings that had resulted when workers moved in and out of work, as many low-paid, low-skilled workers did. It benefited all families, but lower income families received an additional amount for each child which increased in line with average earnings and was significantly more generous than previous support. CTC was paid to the 'main carer', normally the mother. By 2007, CPAG estimated that tax credits had lifted 600,000 children out of poverty and take-up was 80 per cent. But CTC did not

eliminate all problems. A major concern with tax credits was that they subsidised low-paying employers, while the minimum wage did not increase by enough to reduce this problem significantly.

In 2009, CPAG supported a TUC campaign to raise the minimum wage. It had long argued that, contrary to New Labour's 'welfare to work' agenda which was central to its social welfare thinking, work alone was not a way out of poverty while wages were so low for so many people, opportunities for progress or training limited, costs – especially of housing, and especially in London – high and rising, and inequality so extreme. Half of all children in poverty were in households with at least one full-time worker. CPAG and its allies believed that Labour was not looking carefully enough into the multiple causes of poverty. In 2008, End Child Poverty attracted 10,000 people to a Keep the Promise rally in Trafalgar Square, the biggest event ever demanding an end to child poverty.

Meanwhile, child benefit continued for all families. It was increased annually in line with prices, while CTC rose with earnings and, therefore, usually by a higher amount. Between 1999 and 2004 child benefit was increased for the first child by 25 per cent and for subsequent children by 3 per cent in real terms. In 2006,



Thousands attend the Keep the Promise rally in Trafalgar Square



CPAG launched the Make Child Benefit Count campaign on the sixtieth anniversary of the introduction of family allowances, and welcomed its extension to payment from eight weeks before birth. It welcomed also Labour's increased investment in the Warm Front Programme designed to improve energy efficiency for poorer families, and joined the Coalition on Fuel Poverty formed by Age Concern. In May 2007, it supported the additional £340 million provided by Labour to help disabled children, as part of the Aiming High for Disabled Children Review, although, again, it feared that many families would not apply. Throughout Labour's time in office, CPAG continued to take test cases against official actions, despite government disapproval. These were often successful, including on behalf of asylum seekers dubiously denied benefits.

In 2000, led by Barnes, CPAG continued to have a strong reputation for welfare rights work and set out objectives along these lines. Trustees later became concerned about the need to place more emphasis on the policy and campaigning work CPAG had been set up to do. This approach has been adopted more vigorously since 2004.

In 2004 Kate Green took over from Martin Barnes, in a post now known as Chief Executive, until she left in 2009 to run as a successful Labour candidate in the 2010 election. Shan Nicolas took over for a short time as interim Chief Executive until Alison Garnham, who had worked for CPAG as a training officer (1989 to 1995), before moving first to One Parent Families then to serve as Chief Executive Officer of the Daycare Trust, took over in 2010.

CPAG and its allies were concerned throughout Labour's time in office about the increasing use of punitive sanctions against claimants, especially disabled people, unemployed people at a time of rising employment, and rising demands on single parents with children of school age who were not employed. They were also alarmed by Labour's apparent playing into public concern about the presumed reluctance of claimants to seek work, and about benefit fraud, despite persistent research findings that both were minimal and cost considerably less than official errors. However, Labour introduced, among other positive measures, the employment New Deals which provided real help to find work or training to unemployed single parents (among whom the percentage employed increased from 45 to 57 between 1997 and 2008), young people under 25 and older people in their 50s and beyond. More parents gained at least the possibility of flexible working and more schools provided after-hours activities and support for children. The first ever Childcare Act, in 2006, introduced new childcare standards through the Early Years Foundation Stage and introduced the first, free early education entitlement for three- to four-year-olds and piloted it for two-year-olds.

Labour continued to develop a clear anti-poverty agenda, including improvements to childcare, subsidised for poorer families. In 2007, the Department for Education and Employment was transformed into the Department for Children, Families and Schools, including a Child Poverty Unit. Child poverty continued to fall, though still not to the level of the mid-1960s and in 2007, Unicef reported

that the UK had come bottom of the 21 richest nations in a survey of child wellbeing, based on data from the early 2000s. On the other hand, it achieved the biggest reduction in child poverty of any OECD country. By 2010/11, 1.1 million children had been removed from poverty, missing the target to be halfway to ending child poverty by 2010, but a substantial improvement nevertheless. CPAG and the organisations active in End Child Poverty played a big role in bringing about the Child Poverty Act 2010, which enshrined the target in law, with the aim of preserving it despite the financial crisis which had hit in 2008 and a looming general election.

New Labour did more than any previous government to substantially reduce child poverty. But public support for ending child poverty remained weak and Labour, despite its positive actions, made little obvious effort to publicise them in order to persuade voters otherwise. Labour made real improvements, but failed to publicise its achievements, including the reduction of poverty, believing that it brought it little return from voters who were not already Labour supporters. Child poverty barely featured in its election campaigns. CPAG campaigned hard to win over the media and wider public opinion, with limited success. More than ever, at the sixtieth anniversary of the first post-war social security legislation, in 2006, it argued for a changed language, for the need to counter prevailing ‘them and us’ attitudes by arguing for a revival of social solidarity and recognition that universality, as in the health, pensions and education systems, benefited everyone. When the financial crisis hit from 2008, especially in the run-up to the 2010 election, CPAG defended poor families by challenging the injustice that the less well-off were suffering most and child poverty was rising, following cuts resulting from problems they had not caused. It argued that spending on social security rather than cuts could stimulate, not harm, the economy by increasing demand. The government responded by increasing CTC, which protected low-income families.

Child poverty fell and incomes of the poorest families rose on average during Labour’s time in government. Although higher incomes also rose unchecked, inequality between the richest and poorest grew very much less than in the 1980s. One outcome was increased regional disparity. CPAG was concerned at the exceptionally high numbers of children in poverty in London – two in five, 50 per cent in Inner London. There were high levels also elsewhere in England and Wales and in parts of Scotland. This concern was widely shared among non-governmental organisations. Labour had achieved real improvements in the living standards of the poorest people, but huge inequalities remained.

#### Notes

1. CPAG *Annual Report 1990/91*, p11
2. C Oppenheim, Witness Seminar ‘CPAG c.1990–2010’  
[www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/icbh/witness](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/icbh/witness)
3. M Barnes, Witness Seminar ‘CPAG c.1990–2010’  
[www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/icbh/witness](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/icbh/witness)

# TEN AUSTERITY

The fall in child poverty was not resumed following the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, rather it grew. Child benefit was frozen for three years in the Budget of June 2010, along with £22 billion of cuts to benefits and tax credits, and VAT was increased, which harmed the poorest most.

In October 2010, it was announced that from January 2013 child benefit would be withdrawn from households containing a higher rate taxpayer. CPAG and its allies protested vigorously against 'a tax on children'. The government modified the proposal so that in any household containing someone earning £50,000 the benefit would start to taper and would disappear when earnings reached £60,000, which hardly satisfied the critics. This was introduced in January 2013.

CPAG was also, and remains, much concerned by proposals to amalgamate means-tested benefits into a single universal credit. It has long recognised the complexity of existing benefits, but also that this reflects the complexity of many people's lives, including many poorer people. Rolling the benefits into one does not necessarily reduce the complexity. Also, the claim that universal credit would always make work pay was questioned. During the gradual roll-out of universal credit it was clear that work incentives were reduced for many claimants. There were also cuts to housing benefit. In 2011, CPAG welcomed proposals for free childcare for all two-year-olds (Labour had provided it for three- and four-year-olds and had planned this extension), while criticising cuts to Sure Start and demanding more support for families.

In December 2010, the Institute for Fiscal Studies projected that there would be an increase in relative child poverty. CPAG wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, attempting to hold him to the Child Poverty Act. There was little sign of the support CPAG had received on the Conservative benches during previous governments. Its warnings that the Act was being undermined by cuts to public services and tax credits were ignored. CPAG strongly opposed proposed cuts to legal aid, especially its removal from benefit and tax credit cases which would destroy its capacity to advise on appeals which had enabled it to do so much to help claimants for decades. Nevertheless, it

continued to challenge government actions, with some successes. Among others, in 2011 it successfully questioned the demands of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that claimants repay overpaid benefits caused by administrative error which was throwing innocent claimants into debt (though the government later reinstated a modified right to recover overpayments).

In 2008, the Citizens' Rights Office had been replaced by a Policy, Rights and Advocacy Team through which CPAG continued its highly effective challenges to government policy and protection of people in need. In 2014, it won a test case on behalf of three vulnerable women in financial need who were charged a higher rate of council tax because they had recently moved to a different local authority area, and another in the European Court of Justice on behalf of a French woman who became temporarily unable to continue her work in Britain because of pregnancy and childbirth. The decision affirmed her continued right to residency and to claim income support on the grounds that she retained her status as a 'worker' in European law while she was clearly incapacitated from work.



From 2013, CPAG resisted a proposal by the DWP to redefine and measure child poverty in such a way that comparisons across countries and over time would become impossible.

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From 2013, CPAG, with many other NGOs, the Royal Statistical Society, the Scottish government and social policy academics, resisted a proposal by the DWP to redefine and measure child poverty in such a way that comparisons across countries and over time would become impossible. The relative measure of 60 per cent of median disposable income used by the UK government was employed also by the European Union and other international bodies and widely used for cross-national comparisons. A recent study by the OECD had concluded that child poverty, by this measure, was rising in the UK after declining since 1997 and was higher than in many comparable countries. Despite the resistance, it was announced by the DWP in July 2015 that this measure would be replaced in legislation to be introduced to replace the Child Poverty Act 2010.

Benefit sanctions intensified and government rhetoric pitted 'hard-working families' against those 'choosing' the dole, 'strivers versus skivers', despite the fact that two-thirds of families with children in poverty contained at least one member in employment. A major aim for CPAG was still to counter the negative attitudes that polls, including the British Attitudes Survey, suggested had grown further under New Labour and were still growing, unusually in an economic

downturn, which in the past had led to greater sympathy for claimants. Hostility was stoked by some politicians, by sections of the press and by television representations, such as Channel 4's highly negative *Benefit Street* series in 2014. *Poverty* published a comparative survey showing how pervasive such negative representations were in the British media, unlike in Sweden and Denmark. Other articles explored the responses of claimants who felt stigmatised and helpless as a consequence of a culture of blame rather than incentivised to be self-helping as its proponents appeared to hope.

CPAG brought a further legal challenge to the 'benefit cap' introduced in 2013, which, for those out of work and receiving benefits, limited household income for families with or without dependent children to no more than £500 a week, for single people to no more than £350 – a revived version of the old 'wage-stop'. (The median earned income of working families after tax and national insurance was £500.) The appeal involved six families, all headed by single parents, and argued that the cap breached children's rights. In the Supreme Court three out of five judges ruled that the government had failed to respect the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child because it deprived children of the necessities of life, but since the Convention was not part of UK law and the Equality and Human Rights Act had not been breached, they could not intervene.

A report by the Rowntree Foundation in 2014 demonstrated the rise of in-work poverty: in 1983, one-third of those in poverty were in work; by 2013/14 this had risen to 60 per cent, some with more than one job. Government statistics showed that (after housing costs) 62 per cent of children in poverty were in working families.<sup>1</sup> New issues emerged: the withdrawal of what the government described as the 'spare room subsidy' from tenants occupying social housing with apparently unused rooms, the 'bedroom tax' as it was known to its critics; the acute shortage of affordable housing; stringent work assessment of sick and disabled people; and increasing food poverty and an explosion of food banks, unprecedented in modern Britain, providing free food for over one million needy people in 2015/16.

From 2013, a CPAG adviser, funded by the Pears Foundation, worked in a food bank in Tower Hamlets, helping people resolve the benefit problems which brought many of them there and gathering evidence about the reasons for their destitution. Research commissioned by CPAG, Oxfam, the Church of England and the Trussell Trust, much influenced by the work of CPAG's Policy, Rights and Advocacy Team drawing on the Tower Hamlets experience, published in November 2014, found that the main reason for the use of food banks was an acute income crisis, most frequently due to problems with benefits, including sanctions, delayed payment or missing tax credits. Users were generally unaware of crisis payments that might be available to them. Most were unable to work because of ill health or other reasons or had recently lost a job. Most found it 'embarrassing' or 'shameful' to use food banks, but felt they had no alternative. The report was presented to the All Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty, whose own report supported the findings.



**Right Rev Tim Thornton, Bishop of Truro, and CPAG's Imran Hussain celebrate CPAG's success in the House of Lords**

The disadvantages of the children of immigrants, especially asylum seekers, who did not figure in official poverty data because they were not British citizens, and their stringent treatment was another growing concern of CPAG, the more so because they were often unaware even of the basic rights available to them. A *Benefits for Migrants Handbook* published in 2011 helped them and their supporters, and other immigrants, to access available support.

Ambitious solutions and strategies to prevent and end child poverty remain at the heart of CPAG's work. Now, as in earlier periods, it has put significant effort and staff time into defending benefits and tax credits against cuts and 'reforms' that threaten the incomes of poor families. The freezing of child benefit and other benefit rates plus the change to uprating benefits by the Consumer Price Index rather than the Retail Prices Index have greatly increased family poverty since 2010. Projections from the Institute for Fiscal Studies suggest that child poverty could rise by 1.3 million by 2020 – or by 1.5 million according to the Resolution Foundation. London School of Economics research shows that the people in the poorest half of the income distribution have seriously lost out from austerity measures, while the richest half is better off. Those with the broadest shoulders have not taken the heaviest burden and the claim by the coalition and now Conservative government that we are 'all in it together' looks hollow.

Yet CPAG has had victories. By leading a childcare coalition, it established a childcare costs element in universal credit and then an increase from 70 to 85 per cent in the proportion of costs covered. After the abolition of the social fund in 2013, a legal challenge and targeted campaigning led to the partial retention of an identified funding line for the newly localised, discretionary ‘welfare’ provision.

In March 2016, CPAG was successful in persuading the House of Lords to put forward an amendment to retain the existing child poverty measures in the Child Poverty Act, which the government threatened to abolish in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015. The government partially relented and has instead adopted a legal requirement to publish the existing child poverty measures each year. The targets and child poverty strategies have been lost, but small victories like this are nonetheless significant. Part of the campaign, in addition to the usual high-quality briefings to parliamentarians, was the use of social media, including a petition through change.org which garnered over 50,000 sign-ups, showing CPAG campaigning has moved into the digital age.

In recent years, CPAG has taken advantage of the opportunities provided by devolution in Scotland and localism at local authority level in England. In Scotland, CPAG helped ensure that child poverty was a significant issue in the 2014 referendum debate and that in a number of areas, such as the establishment of the Scottish replacement for the social fund (the Scottish welfare fund), help for low-income families in Scotland is greater than for families in England. Through its longstanding partnership with Trust for London, its work on local child poverty strategies and participation in local fairness commissions, CPAG has supported, and learned from, hard-pressed local authorities as they take on greater responsibility for helping poor families with reduced budgets.

#### Notes

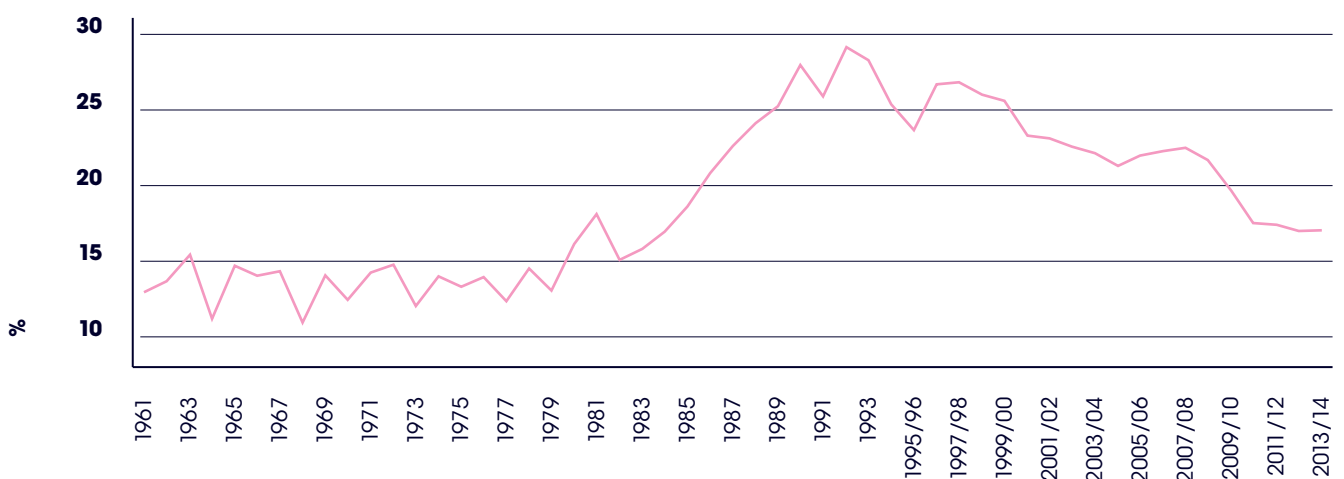
1. [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-19941995-to-20132014](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-19941995-to-20132014)

# ELEVEN CONCLUSION: THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

Fifty years on, CPAG is as active as it has ever been – indeed, probably more active on more fronts, seeking to support children and families in poverty. Unfortunately, the founders aimed to abolish child poverty.

In Britain in the 1960s, amid full employment, greater prosperity and greater equality than ever before, surely they could not have imagined that there could be more, not less, child poverty 50 years later in proportion to population (see Figure 1 below), over one million people needing free food from food banks, a much larger gulf between the richest and poorest in what was still the fifth richest country in the world, that the priorities listed on its website should have changed so little for so long.

Figure 1  
Relative child poverty rates since 1961, Great Britain



Note: poverty line is 60 per cent of median income. Years up to and including 1992 are calendar years; thereafter years refer to financial years. Incomes are measured before housing costs have been deducted and equalised using the modified OECD equivalence scale.

Sources: Author's calculations based on the Family Expenditure Survey and Family Resources Survey, various years; J Cribb, R Joyce and D Phillip, *Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2012*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2012, p84. Updated from recent IFS data: [www.ifs.org.uk/tools\\_and\\_resources/incomes\\_in\\_uk](http://www.ifs.org.uk/tools_and_resources/incomes_in_uk)



This is not because CPAG has failed. With unflagging commitment, it has campaigned for change and has achieved much, while being, always since the earliest days, determinedly neutral concerning party politics, offering informed advice and support to all sides whenever possible, without shirking from strong criticism of all sides whenever it has seemed appropriate. It is an excellent example of the impact possible for a pressure group working outside, never co-opted by, governments. Its outstanding achievement was child benefit, but this survey has suggested the many other areas in which it influenced the development of policy and administration and won the respect of ministers and civil servants for its independent, well-informed advice.

It also played a major role in shaping the development of welfare rights and advice work in the UK and influenced the growth of such work in many countries of Europe and elsewhere. And throughout its history it has worked closely with academics researching in poverty-related areas and with people employed in the social services as well as with the welfare rights movement. This has ensured that it has always been well informed about up-to-date research and practice, and that its activities and accumulated experience have valuably informed research and practice.

CPAG remains a thriving, substantial and financially independent organisation, providing a strong and expert voice through 50 staff based in both London and Glasgow. It still provides the definitive publications on welfare rights, runs training, advice and test cases and leads major policy and research activities that promote positive solutions to prevent and end child poverty in the UK. Internationally, it has inspired a sister organisation in New Zealand and, as we go to press, a new CPAG is being formed in the US.



## CPAG played a major role in shaping the development of welfare rights work in the UK.

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Especially amid the hegemonic neo-liberalism and hostility to ‘welfare’ since the late 1970s (the negative stereotyping of claimants which has not, since the nineteenth century Poor Law, been so hostile and pervasive), it could hardly have done more. But too many of the causes of poverty in the 1960s persisted, even grew, over the 50 years: low pay; inadequate benefits; and low take-up of, and poor information about, means-tested benefits. And CPAG pursued the same solutions: a decent minimum wage; universal, adequate benefits; more information; and legal challenges to the law and its administration. Also, as we have seen, new problems kept emerging, needing new solutions. Without the persistent work of CPAG and similar NGOs, things could only have been much worse. One thing the 50 year history of CPAG illustrates is how active and important such NGOs have long been in British society and how indispensable for defending living standards and ideas of social justice. The struggle continues.

