

FOREWORD

An End in Sight? Tackling child poverty in the UK is the latest in a long line of pre-election analyses published by CPAG in order to scrutinise the Government's record and to attempt to make poverty an election issue. Poverty was not an issue at the last election, reflecting the growing political as well as social and economic exclusion of those in poverty. Nevertheless, within a few months of taking office, the Prime Minister wrote that 'Yes, we are the party of Middle Britain, but if we don't raise the standard of living of the poorest people in Britain we will have failed as a government.'¹

The early signals were that we could not expect anything so 'old Labour' as redistribution and improvements to out-of-work benefit levels to achieve this aspiration, despite the massive increase in inequality over the previous two decades. Such an approach was associated with a *status quo*, which promoted passive 'welfare dependency', in contrast to empowerment through paid work. Yet the cumulative impact of Labour budgets has been progressive, 'with significant gains at the bottom and small losses at the top'.² And an important element has been significant improvements in the real value of income support rates for younger children.

Looking over its shoulder at Middle Britain, the Government has kept remarkably quiet about some of these measures, covering its tracks with the use of 'tough' language, such as 'the end of a something-for-nothing welfare state'. In many ways this is astute politics. It is, though, problematic, for at least three reasons:

1. The tough language constructs social security recipients as 'other' to 'us' the taxpayers. By creating a negative image of the 'welfare dependant', it sends out messages, which could undermine the Prime Minister's call, in his 1999 Beveridge Lecture, for us to recapture the earlier popularity of the welfare state. At the same time the onwards drift down the road of means-testing runs the risk of separating benefit recipients further from the rest of society.
2. 'To do good by stealth' may not be reaping the hoped-for political rewards in 'the Labour heartlands'.³ If this is the case, the lesson is

not to back-pedal on the policy, but to pursue it with more conviction and with an unambiguous message to the country as a whole.

3. This message has to include making the case for progressive taxation as an instrument of social justice and an expression of citizenship responsibility.⁴

In his recent 'green' speech, Tony Blair spoke of the conflict faced by politicians who need both to 'woo' and to 'lead' the electorate. The time has come for the Government to show the same unequivocal leadership in the crusade against domestic poverty as it is providing in the global arena in relation to poverty in developing countries. Its approach to international development, which emphasises participation in decision-making processes as a human right, also has implications for the domestic politics of poverty.⁵ Likewise, principles of global social justice and social inclusion should be applied to the treatment of asylum seekers.

The desire of politicians to woo 'Middle Britain' must not result once again in the marginalisation of poverty as an election issue. I hope that this book will be used to put poverty and inequality on the agenda by all those committed to a more just and equal society.

Ruth Lister

1 *Independent*, 8 December 1997

2 J Hills, *Taxation for the Enabling State*, CASE, 2000

3 See Martin Barnes' editorial in *Poverty* 106, CPAG

4 See the report of the Commission on Taxation and Citizenship, *Paying for Progress*, Fabian Society, 2000

5 See Department for International Development, *Human Rights for Poor People*, February 2000; and *Listen Hear: the right to be heard*, Report of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, Policy Press, 2000