Reframing poverty

The Webb Memorial Trust is hoping to reframe the debate about poverty. Here, Barry Knight **explains why and discusses some early results.**

Introduction

The Webb Memorial Trust's goal is to develop original and practical ways of educating people about what would make a real difference to the alleviation of poverty in the UK. This involves developing:

- a narrative about what a good society, free from poverty, would look like;

- a plan for how to achieve it, with guidance for different interests, such as government, business, civil society and citizens;

- material to enable a blueprint to be implemented.

The Trust aims to shift the terms of the debate, just as our namesake, Beatrice Webb (1858–1943), did in her lifetime. Her *Minority Report* of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress 1905–09 critically asserted that: 'Poverty is not due to a weakness of character, but is a problem of social structure and economic mismanagement.' This perspective transformed poverty from a private problem, in which the individual is the main unit of analysis, to a public one, in which society is the main unit of analysis.

Inspiring politicians of all parties, the wartime coalition government adopted this approach when planning for peace. The Beveridge plan, for instance, drew heavily on the work of Beatrice and Sidney Webb and ushered in a period of 30 years, during which time both Labour and Conservative governments pursued a policy of social security for all.[1]

The approach produced a dramatic fall in poverty lasting several decades. Four main factors drove this. Firstly, expansionary macroeconomic policies, combined with a commitment to full employment, meant that work was plentiful. Secondly, strong trade unions in a relatively protected economy meant that real wages rose in tandem with productivity, allowing workers to enjoy rising living standards. Thirdly, public spending on health, education and housing created a social wage that particularly helped those on lower incomes. And fourthly, fiscal policy taxed the rich to benefit everyone, including the poor.

These four factors combined to create social mobility. People could see that they were better off than their parents and had higher aspirations for their children. The result was what economist Paul Krugman calls the 'great compression'. The incomes of the top and bottom tier of earners converged and poverty was much reduced.[2]

From the mid-1970s onwards, however, these four factors went into reverse. As unemployment became a normal feature of British society, the universal principles behind the welfare state were eroded, high pay of top executives became the norm, and tax rates for the rich were substantially reduced. This led to the 'great divergence', with an ever widening gap between rich and poor.[3]

Informed predictions suggest that poverty will increase over the next few years, as benefits are reduced and the labour market continues to favour low-paid jobs.[4] The continued rise of inequality threatens to divide society, with deleterious consequences for all.

A serious impediment to dealing with these problems is the fact that there is no consensus

about *how* to deal with them. Introducing the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey, which recorded the now familiar unsympathetic attitudes to people in receipt of benefits, Penny Young, chief executive of the National Centre for Social Research, said: 'In a time of economic austerity and social unrest, the big question coming out of this year's report is whether we really are in it together, or just in it for ourselves.'[5] Julia Unwin, chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, speaking at a fringe event at the Conservative Party conference in October 2012, noted that one of the reasons why the Chancellor feels able to cut social security benefits is because he is confident that he is in tune with the public mood.[6]

A log-jam
The debate about poverty in Britain is stuck. Nearly every week a new report appears, setting out some aspect of the problem and how it is getting worse. Reports describe rising debt, reduced benefits, struggles to pay the 'bedroom tax' and the growing use of foodbanks, but despite this constant stream of commentary, little appears to change as a result.

Perhaps this is not surprising. The Trust is currently conducting a study with YouGov and early findings suggest that factual reports do little to change people's minds about poverty. Instead, their initial attitudes prove to be remarkably resilient.

In a survey of 2,000 adults, we found, for example, three distinct attitudes towards poverty:

1. Since poverty is beyond the control of the individual, it is the responsibility of the state, the labour market or some other external agency to deal with it.

2. Since poverty is within the control of the individual, a new set of attitudes and behaviours on the part of the poor is required.

3. Since poverty is an inevitable part of society such that 'the poor are always with us', there is nothing to be done about it.

To investigate these attitudes further, we set up eight focus groups from the sample. The groups were selected using two different criteria: attitudes towards poverty (one of the three above) and income level (high pay, low pay or benefit recipient). The discussion explored many aspects of poverty.

One exercise presented statistics, describing four different facts about poverty – for example:

- 'Some 3.6 million children currently grow up below the poverty line, a figure that is expected to rise to 4.2 million by 2020.'

- 'On average, people think that 41 per cent of the entire welfare budget goes on benefits to unemployed people, while the true figure is 3 per cent.'

Such statements had little effect on changing the participants' minds about poverty. In cases where the evidence appeared to contradict their original views, participants typically dismissed the evidence as 'government propaganda' or 'newspaper talk'.

It is not surprising, then, that if facts hold so little sway, society is so confused about poverty. Indeed, the field is full of myths. To challenge these, the Trust commissioned a study on the myths of poverty from Teesside University, and published the initial findings in March this year.[7] It was well received – but only by people who were already well informed. There is no evidence to date to suggest that we have changed anyone's mind.

We therefore have to ask whether the topic of poverty is at all amenable to rational debate. There is so little agreement about what poverty is and what its causes are that it is inevitable that there is no agreement about how it should be addressed and, hence, little popular support for any given programme to end it. New ways of thinking are needed if we are ever going to get out of this loop of miscommunication.

Reframing the poverty question
To try out a new approach, we decided to reframe the question. Rather than asking people about how best to eradicate poverty (which is getting rid of a negative), we asked them what they thought would make a 'good society' and what they thought a good society without poverty would look like. Such an approach forces people to think positively and not to get into a cycle of blame ('It's all the government's fault' or 'It's all the fault of welfare claimants').

This approach is altogether more promising. There are some things that everyone agrees on. Our polling and focus group research shows that people want good communities, based on respect and tolerance, to feel safe, fairness, and equality. Exemplars include the National Health Service (in the public sector), John Lewis (in the private sector) and Comic Relief (in the voluntary sector).

Factual reports do little to change people's minds about poverty

In thinking about community, people typically mean traditional communities in which there are high levels of face-to-face interaction, rather than online media communities, such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. Communities are seen to thrive when there are common goals and where members are treated equally and fairly.

The idea of a 'good community' and 'poverty' are antinomies. For nearly everyone, poverty has no place in a good society. In saying this, however, people mean 'absolute poverty'. Almost everyone agrees that there should be a minimum standard of life.

It is the idea of 'relative poverty' that divides people. Notwithstanding the fact that most believe that there should be less of a gap between the richest and poorest, most people also feel that it is inevitable that some people are going to be poorer than others. For many of these, once the minimum standard is reached, the issue of poverty no longer applies.

> **A positive narrative means abandoning language that uses phrases like 'end child poverty'**

It is clear, therefore, that different groups stress the importance of different aspects of a good society. For example, people on low incomes and those who have a structural view of poverty stressed the importance of helping the vulnerable, whereas those on high incomes and those with a more individualistic view of poverty stressed the importance of a strong work ethic and of everyone making a contribution. And although almost everyone was concerned about growing inequality, people with a structural view of poverty saw this as being a result of a lack of available opportunities for some, while those with an individual view saw it as being dependent on the effort of the individual.

None of this is particularly surprising, but suggests that, to satisfy different interests in society, any solution to the problem of poverty needs to stress both the role of economic management and social structure, and the role of individual agency and empowerment. This is not a question of 'either/or', but 'both/and'. These views are similar to those that Beatrice Webb expressed more than a century ago.

Discussions about poverty are often derailed because some people – fuelled by some sections of the media – express toxic attitudes towards people on benefits. Our respondents who suggested that poverty was due to the shortcomings of the poor who had brought on their plight themselves tended also to express much insecurity in their own lives. They appeared fearful and nervous, as if they were projecting their own fears onto others. This is a classic form of stereotyping and scapegoating. It is a dangerous situation and can easily lead to racism and attacks on immigrants.

The prevalence of insecurity may be one of the biggest problems we face. If we can address it, we may also address the negative spiral of blame in our society that is at the root of much of unhappiness. It is striking that the wartime coalition government saw people's insecurity as the greatest problem and resolved to put this right after the war. Quintin Hogg, a Conservative, proposed that a department of social security be formed so that the government could take responsibility for this aspect of citizens' lives.

To stop the scapegoating of the poor then, everyone needs to feel safer, and a greater sense of security needs to be the goal of all sectors of society, whether government, business or citizens themselves.

Developing a positive narrative

How do we begin to take this forward? The Webb Memorial Trust sees three main steps. The first is to develop a positive narrative about what a good society might look like. The second is to develop options about how to achieve it. The third is to invite people to think about the different roles that they might play in its development.

A positive narrative means abandoning language that uses phrases like 'end child poverty'. Although the sentiment is admirable, the framing is not. In *Don't Think of an Elephant*, George Lakoff suggests that negative statements often produce the very opposite of what was intended because the very mention of the subject overrides any precision in the syntax.[8] Lakoff suggests that such negative framing typically erodes the success of even the best intentioned efforts at social change. The very idea of 'myth busting', he argues, is flawed, because it commonly has the effect of strengthening the myth.

This perspective brings us back to Beatrice Webb's mind set, which was to develop a comprehensive or agreed narrative of what a good society without poverty might look like. Such an approach involves positive framing and finding approaches that work to fulfil that vision from an asset-based, as opposed to a deficit-based, perspective. Discourse based on positive framing counters the culture of dealing in symptoms and blame, while enabling people of different opinions to move forward together with a vision of what they want, rather than being constantly tripped up by what they do not want.[9] This is

particularly important in a sphere like poverty, which – as we have seen – is riven with ideological disagreement.

Developing policy options
The second stage is to develop policy options. We tested a range of these in our sample of 2,000 people. Figure 1 shows that there is positive popular support for some policies to develop a good society without poverty.

It is evident that, while some options are unpopular, others are not. While few people want to see an increase in benefits, more than two-thirds of people support breakfast clubs for disadvantaged children and a living wage, even if it means increasing taxes or cutting spending elsewhere.

What we badly need is to develop research of this kind so that we finish up with a solution-focused literature. The current social science literature is almost wholly descriptive and analytical about social problems, rather than practical and inspiring about their solutions. However, as the young Beatrice Webb found out when she worked with Charles Booth on his massive *Life and Labour of the People in London* study, empirical investigation of the problem of poverty fails to produce the solution. Understanding problems requires an analytical process, while solutions require a creative process.[10] There are too few rigorous attempts to do this. Avila Kilmurray, who, as Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, has made an immense difference to the peace process there, commented: 'I've read much of the academic literature on peace building, but very little of it tells me what do on Monday.'[11] Much of the literature on poverty is similar, being highly technocratic, narrow and dull. Very little of it inspires action.

Inspiring policy options
To inspire action, policies need to be positively framed and developed to meet people's perceived needs and interests. In preparing for the next stage of our work, we have been searching for material on poverty that will inspire. We have written to key individuals and organisations in the field, and although there is some good material, there is very little of it and it is hard to find.

We hope that one output from our work will be to determine what inspires people to move towards a good society free from poverty. This matters because, if coalitions of interests are required to build a good society, they must know what they are aiming for and how they

Figure 1: **Support for policies to develop a good society**
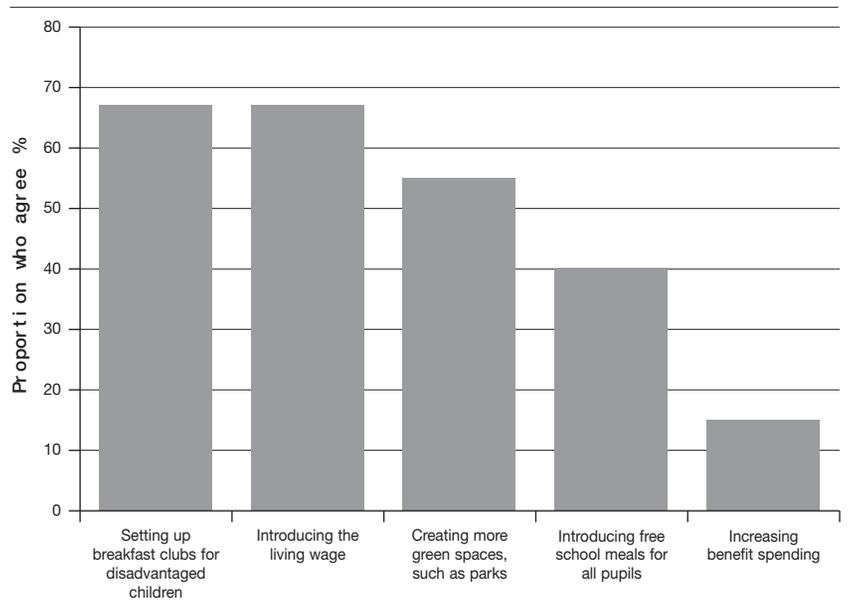
Source: YouGov for Webb Memorial Trust, 2013

can take part. This can be done, as London Citizens has shown in mobilising people towards (among other things) support for the living wage. This has been achieved by building broad-based alliances in which people are excited to be involved in politics, not on a party political basis, but through commitment to ideas that bring positive changes in their communities. Rather than being victims of change, such an approach puts people on the front foot, helping to create the changes they want to see in their lives.

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1 M Ward, *Beatrice Webb: her quest for a fairer society*, Smith Institute, 2011
2 'Confessions of a Liberal', *New York Times*, 18 September 2007
3 See note 2
4 M Brewer, J Browne and R Joyce, *Child and Working-age Poverty from 2010 to 2020*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2011
5 'Social Attitudes Research: Britons lose sympathy for unemployed as they become more self-reliant', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 December 2011
6 'Are people becoming hard hearted?' NatCen blog, http://natcenblog.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/are-people-becoming-harder-hearted.html, 16 October 2012,
7 'Busting the Poverty Myths', *New Statesman*, 20 March 2013
8 G Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: the essential guide for progressives,* Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004
9 Negative framing typically erodes the success of even the best-intentioned efforts at social change. In trying to develop social change, we ignore at our peril what Rumi called the 'thieves of the heart' – greed, ego, anger and insecurity, all of which are made stronger when the premises of an argument are about what we do not want.
10 Einstein is reputed to have said: 'The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.'
11 Cited in B Knight (ed), *A Minority View: what Beatrice Webb would say now*, Alliance and Webb Memorial Trust, 2011