

Blair government tells poor to fend for themselves

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The Blair government's Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) report, *Bringing Britain together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*, was touted as the beginning of a programme to eradicate poverty in Britain in a 'New Deal for Communities'. It was launched by Prime Minister Blair and his deputy, John Prescott, on a council estate in London on September 15.

The report's remit was to 'develop integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates, including crime, drugs, unemployment, community breakdown and bad schools, etc.' Its authors claim that it 'sets out the most concerted attack on area deprivation this country has ever seen.'

The SEU's report is derived from a survey of 44 Local Authorities where poverty is the most severe. These cover 11.8 million people, or 24 percent of England's population. It notes that between 1979 and 1995 net incomes after housing costs of the richest 10 percent grew by almost 70 percent, while the poorest 10 percent saw their incomes drop by 8 percent.

The 44 areas listed contain 85 percent of the most impoverished wards (electoral districts) in the country. In comparison with the national average these areas have two-thirds more unemployment. The level of educational attainment is significantly lower, with 37 percent of 16 year olds without a single GCSE exam at grades A to C. A quarter of adults have poor literacy and numeracy and mortality rates are 30 percent higher than the average. These areas also have two or three times the level of poor housing, dereliction and vandalism.

Under the 'New Deal for Communities', the most impoverished areas are supposed to devise programmes aimed at tackling these social problems. Initially 17 'pathfinder' areas have been singled out as 'showcase

schemes' that must compete against each other for funding. The report also calls for the establishment of 18 Action Teams drawn from government departments, academia, business and community organisations. A 'national strategy' will be developed by next year, setting out a 10- to 20-year programme for dealing with poverty.

Far from laying the basis for such a strategy, the SEU rejects any call for increased public spending in order to provide decent jobs and services. It states that in the past, 'Public money has been wasted on programmes that were never going to work.... We are all paying for this failure, whether through the direct costs of benefits and crime, or the indirect costs of social division and low achievement.'

In place of traditional reformist policies, a paltry budget of just £800 million over three years is all that has been allotted. This is to be used to encourage various community-based 'self-help' projects that rely on voluntary labour and private sector finance. The SEU states, 'better access to capital' (i.e., borrowing credit from the banks and building societies) is the way to 'regenerate poor neighbourhoods and encourage greater self-reliance.'

To put all of this into perspective, the government's cash allocation amounts to between £50 and £200 per household up until the millennium. It has been estimated that the cost of refurbishing and rebuilding rundown housing alone would be £20 billion--more than 20 times as much as Labour intends to spend on its entire anti-poverty programme.

The SEU states that the success of Labour's project will not be measured by the 'numbers of people helped into jobs and numbers of homes built' by government. Instead government must facilitate the work of others in creating 'lower long-term unemployment and

worklessness; less crime; better health; better qualifications.'

Far from declaring a war against poverty, Blair has declared war on the poor. A key element of the SEU report is to develop more effective means of social control in deprived working class neighbourhoods. The SEU calls for the creation of a network of spies known as 'Neighbourhood Wardens' or 'Super-Caretakers', who would collaborate with the police: 'Effective policing strategies are essential but preventing crime and reassuring the public need not be left to the police alone. Often what is needed is for there to be a full-time and recognisable official presence to keep an eye on what is happening, to take early preventive action and be someone to whom residents can turn to for assistance when needed.'

The report notes that many of the most deprived estates are located next to affluent neighbourhoods and prosperous city centres. At its official launch, Blair's only answer to this stark polarisation was to warn that it might be necessary to bulldoze some of the worst estates and build parks or playgrounds in their place. He gave no indication of what would become of the former residents.



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