

Forty percent of children in Britain born into poverty and deprivation

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At the end of last month British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Treasury Minister Gordon Brown made keynote speeches devoted to the subject of child poverty and its supposed eradication. Alongside these pronouncements of government policy there have been a number of damning reports relating to child poverty, including statistics that 40 percent of all children in Britain today are born into deprivation.

Blair used the occasion of the annual Beveridge lecture to claim that he was standing in the footsteps of William Beveridge--the Liberal reformer whose blueprint inspired the establishment of the welfare state reforms introduced by the 1945 post-war Labour government.

In the manner of a pious nineteenth century English clergyman, Blair said that New Labour had a historic aim to be the first generation to end child poverty for ever. "We need to break the cycle of disadvantage so that children born into poverty are not condemned to social exclusion and deprivation.... Our family policy is geared to children and their well being more than the type of family that a child is born to. I make no apologies for that."

Contrary to all the hype surrounding Blair's presentation, it is difficult to see how the extra £6 billion made available will alleviate the plight of poor children. The six-point plan outlined is firmly rooted in the self-help policies most closely associated with Blair's "third way" and an end to universal benefits. Amidst the crocodile tears shed for the poor, Blair reiterated his oft-quoted phrase of them needing a "hand up not a hand-out".

Chancellor Gordon Brown underscored this a week later when he presented a treasury report-- *Tackling Poverty and Extending Opportunity*. This revealed that two out of every five children were born poor and three

million now grow up in low-income families. The study defines poverty as a couple with children living on less than half the average income--£150 a week before housing costs.

Brown stressed, "It is not something for nothing we're offering. We're saying in return for you accepting responsibilities to work or to bring up your children, we will help you. We're not going to spend money simply compensating people, as we did in the past, for their poverty."

The same day that Brown made his announcement, a further two reports detailing the social conditions facing children in Britain were released. One was by the Centre for Economic Performance. Their study has followed the same children from birth in 1958, and concludes that poverty was the most important factor linking childhood development with subsequent social and economic outcomes. It showed that one-third of all children today--4.3 million--live in households with below average income, compared with 1.3 million in 1968. The increase is due to the growth in the number of children living in families where no family member works--from 2 to 10 percent in two-parent families and from 30 to 58 percent in single-parent families.

A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report found that children growing up in low-income families may be "learning to be poor" from an early age, as diminished expectations of what their parents can afford lead them to scale down their own hopes and aspirations for the future.

Despite the rhetoric of Blair and Brown, government policy is not shaped by these or any other such social findings, but rather the needs of the global economy in which there is no place for the welfare state. Both Blair and Brown alluded to the need for the increased disciplining of the poorest sections of society, terming

"undeserving" and "lazy". Brown cited the introduction of the working family tax credit in the latest budget as the means through which this will be done.

Leading advocates of child welfare welcomed Blair and Brown's statements as a "step in the right direction". Nothing could be further from the truth. The measures outlined to "radically reform the welfare state" will worsen the circumstances in which tens of thousands of the poorest children live.

This was cautiously recognised by an editorial in the leading business newspaper the *Financial Times*, which stated: "Tony Blair's claim to be heir to William Beveridge, founder of the welfare state, is premature to say the least.... The Blair vision is couched in terms of encouraging independence and greater responsibility.... The two main ways of achieving this are to put greater emphasis on means testing and to impose tough conditions, such as those that apply to the young unemployed.... Both can be justified, but they amount effectively to an ending of the universal insurance against poverty and sickness as envisaged by Beveridge. They also create new problems of equity and social acceptability."



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