

What Worked: Labour's track
record on social exclusion and the
challenges for the next government
By David Blunkett and Kate Green

About the authors

DAVID BLUNKETT is MP for Sheffield Brightside and has served as Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

KATE GREEN is former Chief Executive of Child Poverty Action Group and is Labour's parliamentary candidate for Stretford and Urmston

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Fabian Society
11 Dartmouth Street
London SW1H 9BN

020 7227 4900
info@fabian-society.org.uk

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A question of whether we care

By David Blunkett

There are very few people who, at some point in their lives, have not experienced a major problem. It can be bereavement of a loved one, or a sudden and unexpected event such as unemployment or the onset of disability. It can be two or three smaller events that come one after the other, like waves coming up a beach.

Many people sink into what can appear to be unmanageable difficulties – and fear that they’ll never get out of them. They can face varying degrees of depression, leading to the reinforcement of other problems – from not being able to get a job to not meeting people, getting out of the house or having an income that allows you those pleasures which make life worthwhile.

Since the beginning of industrialisation 250 years ago, villages and rural communities have offered basic neighbourly and community help.

To recapture that mutuality and reciprocity today there is a general consensus that we need to reinforce the local. But sometimes this ‘localism’ is carried to extremes, where we decentralise and devolve without any concept of how we can hold authority to account. Often, we don’t have clear lines of responsibility – or the opportunity for meaningful redress.

That is why the experiment driven by my former Permanent Secretary and my friend Sir Michael Bichard, Total Place, demands urgent expansion and reinforcement. It’s basic common sense: bringing together the challenges that individuals, families and communities face and then combining the funding and the mechanisms for delivery in order to address those challenges.

Another friend of mine, Emma Harrison, is the founder and head of A4e (Action for Employment). She deals with the challenges not just of unemployment but of rehabilitation, reassertion of confidence and self-esteem. She has come up with her own snappy title for addressing these problems. She calls it ‘Total Person’ – not simply looking at the problems of the wider community, but addressing the issues facing individuals and their families in a meaningful way.

There’s a great deal in this. Looking at the core problems, getting to the root of what is wrong and then doing something about it. Sadly, all too often, we don’t do it.

I’m involved with a number of major voluntary and community organisations – from very small charities to big national operations like the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Guide Dogs, the Alzheimer’s Society and Breakthrough Breast Cancer. On every occasion, there will be more than one problem to be addressed when an individual reaches out for help. One local organisation that I’ve been involved in for many years brings together the

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relatives of drug and substance abusers. Their cry to me when I was Home Secretary was very simple: "Does our son or daughter have to go to prison in order to detox, get life skills and escape from the pushers?" The answer clearly has to be "No".

Old-fashioned social work used to adopt this approach. It had the fancy name of 'generic social work', but it was also based on community ('the patch', as they used to call it) and specialisation. We now have Children's Trusts, Children and Young Persons Directorates, Adult Services and the like. The approach to dealing with these problems has fragmented.

For children, 'protection' has become the mantra – understandably, given the furore every time there is a horrendous and totally unacceptable death of a child. That is about a community and society that cares; but it's also one that's in danger of not seeing the wood for the trees. Process is being imposed instead of prevention. Some social workers spend more than half their time on administration and bureaucracy.

Two other experiments in Sheffield 30 years ago bit the dust – partly because of the pressures of Margaret Thatcher's decimation of local government and partly because of the 'professionals' reacting against experiments that didn't fit into their preconceptions of what people 'needed'. One of these was the development of 'Home Makers' to go in and work with a family as a mentor and supporter – helping with budgeting, with child nurturing and with the day-to-day crises that were destabilising and fracturing the family. Subsequently, the Labour Government developed the Family Intervention Programmes which originated in Dundee.

The other experiment tried to meet the challenge of ageing: a village within a city, providing a range of houses from flats to bungalows with central facilities that were available when needed – from laundry to luncheon clubs. Because it was part of the community, it wasn't, in today's terms, a 'retirement village'. But it had all the beneficial effects of those developments which are now returning to fashion.

There has been progress over the course of the last decade – but a renewed focus on homelessness would reap benefits. The ability of a family to hold down a tenancy is crucial for reintegration and overcoming dysfunctionality – a roof over one's head being a basic right, but also often being the source of community disquiet where anti-social behaviour creates havoc. Tough action – as provided for in the legislation we passed in 2003 – is needed to deal with such behaviour; but we need to ensure that the support systems are available to do something about it in the long-term. Individual Support Orders, alongside Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, are essential. Were we to go back to the early period of this Government, I would certainly be advocating that we emphasise this joint approach, which demonstrated that we were 'on the side' of the community, but also 'alongside' the individual or family in turning things around.

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Intergenerational disadvantage has to be tackled at its root. For communities to flourish, those whose lifestyles are outside the norms of society need to be tackled. This benefits the individual, but it is also essential for the maintenance of a civilised and civilising community.

To assist with tackling disadvantage, we have Sure Start. I'm deeply proud of this. I believe it's one of this Government's greatest legacies and that it will prove in years to come to be ever more beneficial to functioning families, to have helped heal fractured communities and to have given a chance in life to kids who would, in previous generations, have been on the scrapheap. It's important that this is not watered down. Sure Start as originally envisaged was never just about providing a children's centre and childcare. It was about a holistic approach to the development of parenting skills, of child rearing, of the best of what we know is important in terms of child health and early learning. It was about aspiration, people's expectations and the means to achieve them through genuine opportunity – built not just on individualising a problem and seeking to solve it in a fragmented manner but by recognising that by building the strength of the community, reinforcing social capital and the critical core of self-help and mutual help, we could do so much more.

It is at the earliest time in a child's life that we can spot not only the dangers, but the potential. The dangers often arise through family circumstances. We must reinforce society by intervening at an early stage to tackle dysfunctional families, unacceptable behaviour by parents and any lack of a basic structure and framework by which to live.

Baseline assessment at the time the child entered infant school is one way of picking up challenges and working out how best to deal with them. The development of both Sure Start and universal nursery education should have enabled us to pull this process forward; but practice is variable and commitment is sometimes lacking. For every adult to matter, we need to start with the nurturing of children, as well as the fostering of responsibility and wherewithal to deliver. We are, in effect, providing the 'extended family' by seeing the community as that strength and resource. This is a very substantial philosophical distinguishing feature of social democratic politics. We recognise that it is people themselves, on the ground, doing the job, who make the difference. The concept that government can do it all and that government is to blame for people not doing it, is not only bizarre but extremely dangerous.

So, we need Total Person as well as Total Place. We need to combine the resources and the mechanisms for providing answers.

The engagement of the public is crucial, especially at the neighbourhood level, where people can be included in deciding where small budgets can be deployed to make big changes (as in Cologne, where the internet is used to involve people in making decisions about priorities). The issue is not one priority against another, or one set of cutbacks versus another; but how to combine budgets in a way that meets the aspiration of Total Place.

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With the global meltdown and the challenge of deficit reduction, all we hear is the cry for cuts. Any fool can actually cut budgets or reduce spending. The real issue is how to use money more wisely; how to build up that social capital, reinvigorate civil society and help people to help themselves ... but in a way which actually reinforces mutuality.

If, of course, you're against the role of government per se – if you believe that the state is, by its very nature, a dangerous leviathan – then you will, as our opponents do, wish to dismantle that collaborative and collective approach. You will wish to create a social market to match the economic market which has been so devastating in its effect on all our lives.

If, however, you believe that we can have an enabling, supportive state which engages people and reinforces their sense of worth and civic pride – and that we can rebuild a genuine sense of community – then you will want us to join up services, look at problems holistically and meet people's needs in a way that makes sense to them. People don't recognise departmental boundaries, or the ever-changing names of agencies and quangos. What they want and what we should give them is help in an appropriate form when it is most needed.

Whether it is individual budgets for people with specific or special needs, tailored services (including for education) or programmes designed to help people with multiple challenges (drugs and associated mental health problems, for example), we must make what we offer in terms of services more flexible, responsive to personal need and avoid confining people to the silos which we ourselves create. After 1997, we developed, as part of the reform of the Employment Service, personal advisers in relation to the New Deal. This has now been enhanced with much greater responsiveness through the Flexible New Deal. There is so much more that could be done in relation to greater delegation, use of imagination and ability to respond to the particular needs of individuals.

This touches on the continuing modernisation and reform agenda for the delivery of public services. The importance of the voluntary and community sector – the Third Sector – is critical here; not just in terms of innovation, but in meeting niche requirements.

Achieving this is a massive task. In 2004, we started the process of legislating for what became known as the National Offender Management Service. The idea – building on the progress we had made in bringing education, health and employment services into prisons – was to join up the best of the work of probation with prisons and outside organisations. The result has sadly not been an influx of imaginative or creative ideas to bridge the gap and to work with offenders as human beings, but rather a retrenchment, with the probation service becoming increasingly disaffected and the voluntary sector feeling that their part is unappreciated and neglected.

I use this as an example of how good intentions can come apart if those engaged in the delivery of services are not committed to an entirely radical

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new approach. It is those who deliver services and not those who formulate and legislate on them who can, in the end, make the difference. To recognise this is to appreciate that we have to change hearts and minds, to mobilise the will of people to make that difference to the lives of others in their workplace, in their neighbourhood and in their own family.

In the end, it's a question of whether we care.

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How to make the case – lessons for campaigners

by Kate Green

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One of the great successes of the new Labour Government in 1997 was its ability to marry popular and pragmatic policy-making with strong positions of principle. From the establishment of an ethical foreign policy to the introduction of a minimum wage, Labour's radical policy programme was seen to demonstrate – to considerable gratification on the left – that progressive policy measures could indeed prove economically sensible, politically popular and socially just – all at the same time.

After two decades of Conservative under-investment, Labour had come to power with much to do to repair public services, and rebuild a system of social support. As a result, the early years were marked by policies that benefited “the many not the few”, which clearly contributed to their popularity. But there was also extra attention from the outset for the multiply disadvantaged, the so-called “hard to reach”. That was demonstrated by the new Government's innovative approach to tackling what was now termed “social exclusion”.

Encapsulated in the sound bite ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’, this in fact encompassed a policy approach that set out to tackle a host of ‘wicked issues’ in a focussed, proactive and balanced way. A new Social Exclusion Unit was established soon after the election, and located in 10 Downing Street, placing action on some of the most difficult – and costly – social policy challenges firmly at the very heart of government.

The imaginative and rounded approach to addressing social exclusion that was embarked on by New Labour had much to commend it. It acknowledged the significance of economic and social inequality as both a driver and a result of exclusion, something that had been largely missing from the Conservative analysis of the preceding two decades. This enabled it to secure campaigners' support for a policy programme that paid attention to individual behaviour and aspiration too. It recognised that the victims and perpetrators of dysfunctional behaviours came often from the same communities, and that the poorest were the most likely victims of antisocial behaviour and crime. And it took a holistic approach to tackling disadvantage, so that policy at its best crossed both Whitehall and professional boundaries.

Sadly, however, the idealism and the enthusiasm began in time to fade. The Social Exclusion Unit was effectively downgraded, moved out of Downing Street, its prominence and influence considerably reduced. Arguably this was both cause and consequence of a hardening policy agenda, partly no doubt reflecting ministerial dissatisfaction and frustration at the slowness of results.

By the middle of Labour's second term, the mood music in government had clearly changed. In 2006, then Prime Minister Tony Blair delivered a speech in which he identified a group of children whose future dysfunctional behaviour he seemed to suggest could be predicted in the womb. Campaigners were horrified: Blair was seen casually to have conflated the poor, the excluded, the chaotic, the ill, the criminal and the badly behaved. The speech was regarded variously as pandering to popular prejudice, creating an exaggerated sense of the scale of the problem, damaging public confidence, and reducing room for more progressive policies that would achieve results over time. Yet the Cabinet Office acknowledged that only 2.5 per cent of families could be seen as 'multiply disadvantaged', and the object of the intensive – and indeed often sensible – policies that Blair proposed.

Today the policy legacy of those early years is unsurprisingly somewhat mixed. Redistributive policies to reduce poverty and improve life chances sit alongside more punitive welfare reforms, and crackdowns on already record low levels of benefits fraud. A massive prison building programme, increased police numbers, and more criminal justice legislation than you can shake a stick at have seen a sustained fall in crime, but have been accompanied by what many on both the left and the right perceive as a worrying encroachment on individual liberties and a weakening of rights. Low levels of child wellbeing persist despite a host of initiatives to improve children's life chances and the quality of their childhoods, including the much lauded Sure Start, substantial investment in education, and the creation of Children's Trusts.

The Conservatives meanwhile have shifted position, though their policy approach lacks substance, and is scarcely less confused than Labour's. Their shift began with the Damascene conversion of Iain Duncan Smith. Mistrusted at first by campaigners, and ignored by his own party, today his Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is widely regarded as having brought poverty and social exclusion to the forefront of the party's attention – though questions remain about the likely influence of the CSJ on the agenda of a future Cameron government. Conservatives may now talk the talk of early intervention and prevention, but the lack of spending commitments and reliance on voluntarist solutions hardly suggest a wholehearted determination to tackle the structural causes of multiple disadvantage.

As the parties have blown hot and cold, meanwhile, the public has become more sceptical. Popular attitudes may be less forgiving, less egalitarian, and more hostile to individual rights than in the 1990s. But the public are also now acutely aware of the wide divisions in society, and, as Peter Kellner shows in *Hardest to Reach?*, willing to protect public spending that can save more money in the long-term, by reducing or mitigating the impact of inequality and disadvantage.

Against this confusing backdrop, how best can campaigners recapture the focus and resources needed to tackle the toughest challenges? It is perhaps controversial to suggest that securing public support for preventative, progressive programmes that reach the most disadvantaged in a difficult spending climate requires a return to some of the popular and successful

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concepts and language of the Blair early years: 'what works', 'rights and responsibilities', 'triangulation', 'joined up government'. But while many on the left may feel suspicious, it must also be remembered that the early Blair programme was in many senses a radical one. The challenge now is to reclaim the popularising language for a bolder agenda that's founded on principle not political expediency, and to develop radical policy solutions to meet the needs of more difficult, sceptical times.

To be sure, there are tensions and disappointments to be addressed. Dislike on the left of the way that the rights and responsibilities agenda has played out reflects a perception that the focus has shifted attention to individual aspiration and effort, diminishing the significance of structural drivers of inequality. An imbalance has been identified as a result: increasing obligations on individuals, without commensurate improvements in their rights. Rights and responsibilities have come to be seen as a new way of dividing the deserving from the undeserving poor, and associated only with policies aimed at the most disadvantaged.

Yet the concept has a compelling moral logic – especially if fairly applied to all. Particularly in the present climate, it works well as an argument that wealth brings responsibility too. The current adverse publicity for 'non dom status' for example or the hostility to bankers' bonuses could be seized on to drive popular and more egalitarian policies that recognise the obligations of the better off. Meanwhile guaranteeing meaningful rights to support, to housing, education, childcare – and to individual autonomy, information and voice – can be counterpoised alongside more rigorous obligations on individuals, and used to secure investment in frontline services, while further strengthening the argument that 'rights and responsibilities' run two ways.

Such an approach – marrying the values-led, the radical and the politically popular – also of course requires evidence of policy success. Too often politicians have been guilty of picking and pushing for the evidence that suits, yet this can easily backfire. The Conservatives have been able to argue for cuts in Sure Start spending in part because it was evaluated too early in a bid for political advantage, producing some patchy results and creating an open goal for the sceptics. It is important to acknowledge that policy has not always delivered the hoped-for results for the most disadvantaged. But great care and rigour in disentangling 'what works' and the reasons for the effectiveness of different policy interventions are vital to protect frontline services when the public finances are so tight.

Sustaining the argument for prevention and early intervention in a difficult spending climate could both reinforce and draw upon Labour's distinctive message about its approach to the public finances. Alistair Darling's measured approach to managing down the deficit already seems more popular and credible with voters than the immediate cuts proposed by George Osborne. As part of the case for that managed approach, the analogy should be extended to argue that planned and sustained investment in high quality and accessible public services will produce the best returns in tackling the most challenging

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social problems, in the long run delivering savings for the public purse.

Finally, we must be bolder in proclaiming the institutional structures (the Human Rights Act, the Equality Bill) and processes which support a rights-respecting approach. With some brave exceptions, ministers have become over-cautious about arguing for rights, fearing they will lose popular support. Yet the evidence of the 1990s suggests that need not be the case. Policy founded on equality, universalism and rights swept Blair to power in 1997 on a platform of radical change. Today, campaigners should be unapologetic in reclaiming the language of fairness for all.

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