

Where next for Gordon Brown?

His first hundred days

Gordon Brown MP formally became the leader of the Labour Party on 24 June, and Prime Minister three days later. Advice to the new Prime Minister has been flowing fast and furious, ranging from impassioned demands that he distance himself from the Blair years and bring the troops out of Iraq, to directives that he prioritise education and global warming. CPAG asked a number of prestigious commentators and people who are directly affected by poverty to outline a compelling agenda for the new Prime Minister. All agreed that high levels of child poverty and gross wealth inequality in the UK are a disgrace. Gordon Brown needs to be more open in challenging our complacent attitudes to poverty, and to adopt much more robust and transparent policies to reduce it. Here, he is urged to inculcate a sense of public outrage about child poverty and inequality in the UK that will guarantee it a place at the forefront of the political and electoral agenda.

Over to you, Mr Brown

Anthony Giddens

I was in the audience when Tony Blair made his now celebrated announcement of the Government's plan to put an end to child poverty by 2020, and to do so in three successive stages, all with binding targets. I do not remember there being a collective gasp of amazement/admiration at that moment – it took some while for the proposals to sink in. At that time, Labour was widely regarded as an ultra-cautious government, unwilling to countenance any radical ideas. The only other moment like it over the past ten years was when Blair announced in an interview with David Frost that spending on the health service would be elevated to the European Union average within a relatively short period of time. It is not even clear



Campaign to End Child Poverty

Barnardo's would like the new Prime Minister to give a clear message to the British people that the injustice of child poverty has no place in our affluent society. Gordon Brown must do this by promising to spend an additional £3.8 billion (less than 1 per cent of this year's public spending), which the Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates it would cost to halve child poverty by 2010. We are also calling for the establishment of a UK Commission on Child Poverty, chaired by the Prime Minister or Chancellor, which would identify the investment and policies needed to hit the 2020 target to eradicate child poverty. ■

Martin Narey, Chief Executive,
Barnardo's

A ten-year-old living in poverty in Britain today does not only suffer from not having enough money; poverty of hope and aspiration is just as crippling, and much harder to solve. That is why Gordon Brown's eye-catching initiatives in his first hundred days cannot be all about tax credits and fiscal fiddling, and why he has immediately to address the circumstances that are leading to another generation who do not hope for anything other than welfare dependency.

Toynbee Hall is about to launch a mentoring project, supporting young people at risk of under-achievement to perform better in school. By encouraging these young people, we can ensure that their children do not have to face poverty. With our partners, we deliver debt advice across London. By helping people to manage their debts, we can prevent their children from living with the consequences. But what we really need to be able to deliver is financial literacy training to make sure that, in the future, people are less likely to take decisions that place them at the mercy of their creditors. By training young people to manage their money now, we can ensure that their children do not have to face poverty.

It is projects like these that can really begin to address the causes of child poverty; poverty that is shameful in a country as wealthy as ours. For the children born in the decade since Gordon Brown has been Chancellor, it might not be too late. If he is to address the problems that face the next generation while he is Prime Minister, he has to move quickly. ■

Luke Geoghegan, Chief Executive, Toynbee Hall

that this undertaking had been thought through beforehand. The promise about child poverty, however, was part of a written speech and was introduced as a core part of the Government's welfare policy. Gordon Brown was reportedly incandescent when Blair made his comments about NHS funding, and is supposed to have said to Blair afterwards, 'You've just stolen my fucking budget'. But in the case of the statement about child poverty, there is no doubt that Brown knew about, and approved, what the Prime Minister said.

Brown is now on the threshold of becoming Prime Minister himself. In my new book, *Over to You, Mr Brown*, I try to show why Labour supporters should not despair. The Tories currently may be some way ahead in the polls, but it is the mid-point between elections, for a party in its third term of government. It is not surprising that there are many disillusioned voters around. Brown will need to reinvent Labour almost as thoroughly as happened prior to 1997, but if he supplies able and – let us hope – inspirational leadership, he has a distinct chance of pulling round Labour's fortunes. Gaining a fourth term will be difficult, but it is far from impossible.

In the book, I argue that Brown should discard the 'War on Terror', but should openly declare a 'War on Poverty'. Contrary to what many critics say, the Labour Government has been a redistributive one. Some three million people have been lifted out of poverty since 1997, including a substantial number of children and many older people. However, these achievements can be regarded as no more than a beginning. Britain remains a highly unequal society, in which far too many people are denied the chance to live full and rewarding lives. Even as judged purely in economic terms, poverty and inequality could stunt Britain's chances – almost 20 per cent of the population lack qualifications or skills, in a world in which unskilled work is drying up.

I believe a Brown-led government should use the pledge to reduce and then eliminate child poverty as a 'flying wedge' in attacking poverty and inequality more generally. Why? Because child poverty is the most pernicious form of poverty there is that can affect a person over the whole life-span; because reducing child poverty *ipso facto* reduces poverty and inequality more generally – after all, virtually all children live in families; because no one can argue that children are to blame for the poverty they experience; and because child poverty is associated with a range of other social problems, such as a propensity in later life to crime or drug addiction.

What could ending child poverty mean? I agree with those who argue that a reasonable definition would be getting the incidence of such poverty down to 5 per cent – equivalent to what has already been achieved in the Scandinavian countries. Rather like unemployment, it could never be reduced to zero. The 2010 target of lowering child poverty by half should be adjusted accordingly. But how are we to get to that target? What has become clear from a flurry of reports on progress made is that existing policies are too modest to do the job. The fact that now only 600,000 children are claimed have been taken out of poverty, rather than the 700,000 stated a while ago by the Government, has given rise to widespread concern – although it may be an artefact of the limited size of the sample used to assess child poverty levels. However, the figures almost certainly mean that there has been a flattening out in the numbers of children taken out of poverty. The extra money allocated in the recent Budget is way short of making the difference necessary to get the trend back on track.

If he is to reverse the widespread feelings of disillusionment that many of the public now have about Labour, Brown will have to declare a 'new beginning' for the Party. I would like to see a revised strategy for reaching the targets for reducing child poverty made a core part of that new beginning. Putting more money into tax credits will help but, unless the sums are very large, will not resolve the problem. Strategic rethinking is required. Let us have an open debate about it, within the Party and within the country at large. There are quite a few possibilities. One might be to focus much more upon the low paid, who are not helped by tax credits. Another would be to integrate other anti-poverty programmes much more directly with the effort to reduce child poverty, as the Harker Report proposes.

In my book, I argue for the introduction of a wealth tax, whose proceeds would not go to the Treasury, but directly into a fund for helping poor children. The distribution of wealth is even more unequal than that of income. Why should the super-rich not have some responsibility for helping the super-poor? It could be seen as part of a broader set of responsibilities assumed by those who have done well out of our society to help subsequent generations get on in life. ■

Anthony Giddens is a Labour peer. His most recent book, *Over to You, Mr Brown: how Labour can win again*, is published by Polity Press

Listen to those with experience

Matt Davies

No one can deny that we have seen poverty rise up the political agenda in the last ten years. But there is clearly progress to be made, and people experiencing poverty will demand that the new Prime Minister's action and rhetoric match their expectations of a society free from all forms of poverty.

Take Kelly, a lone parent of teenage children. She, like many other people with whom ATD Fourth World is in contact, has seen little change in her day-to-day struggle to raise her family. Increases in her child benefit and child tax credit have been offset by huge rises in utilities and cost of transport. Violence on her estate has become so bad that she has been forced to flee her home and move into temporary accommodation. Her experience, however, to resist poverty remains an untapped resource. She says:

The challenge for me is the isolation, the loneliness, the painful awareness that we are not able to join in society or play any part in it. We are spectators as we watch other people live, then struggle to survive to make a life for our children.

We are powerless, faced with our circumstances, not taken seriously, our voice not respected. Those who have never lived it think they know better. I want to be heard, respected, my experience valued, not derided. Our voice can raise awareness of poverty and break the barriers down.

Kelly, and many other people with experience of poverty, challenges the new Prime Minister not just to listen to what people living in poverty have to say, but to engage with them as partners in the fight to eradicate it.

In July, the Department for Work and Pensions will host a conference, bringing together fifty people from across the UK with experience of poverty and fifty officials from central and the devolved governments. The participation of people living at the sharp end of poverty will offer a unique insight into the impact of the Government's social inclusion strategy on deprived groups. This is a step in the right direction and needs to be built on across all areas of anti-poverty policy. It recognises a need to include the expertise of people whose

experience of social exclusion, and of the policies aimed at addressing it, makes them uniquely qualified to identify areas where the strategy can be improved.

It is, however, difficult for people experiencing poverty to work with policy makers and politicians when they feel stigmatised and judged by the language used. We are told that social exclusion is about reaching out to 'high cost, high harm families' and 'adults with chaotic lifestyles'; we see plenty of campaigns telling us 'No ifs, No Buts, Benefit Fraud is a Crime', but how often do we see similar campaigns about wealthy tax evaders defrauding us as a society?

As a consequence, people living in poverty often feel they are to blame for the circumstances in which they find themselves. The *Get Heard* report, produced by the Social Policy Task Force in 2006 to provide grassroots' voices and recommendations to the Government's National Action Plan on Social Inclusion, noted that:

Parents experiencing poverty need more recognition for the hard work that they do, and policies must support parents' efforts to provide the best for their children – many parents feel under pressure and are afraid that their children will be taken into care if they ask for help because they are poor.¹

The use of stigmatising language, as well as ever more punitive policies and discourse (fining or imprisoning parents for school absence and 'ASBO babies'), can only result in socially excluded people, already frightened to ask for support, becoming more isolated and removed from services designed to meet their needs.

What people in poverty want to see is a Prime Minister who leads by example in adopting a public language that recognises the efforts made by families on low incomes to provide the best for their children in difficult circumstances. This will surely assist in engaging the, largely sceptical, wider public in the fight to eradicate child poverty and give the Government a mandate to make the required investment to meet the 2020 target.

But that investment needs to reach those who most need it, and be spent in such a way as to benefit those children and parents hardest hit by poverty. At present, statutory service delivery is often dominated by meeting targets, leading to short-termism that cannot bring about the desired outcomes for such families. Prevention seems to be re-emerging as a buzzword, but will this entail the level of long-term investment

When Labour came into power in 1997, it declared war on child poverty. It promised to tackle the UK's abysmal record that saw nearly four million children grow up in poverty. And it has made many inroads.

There has been a 23 per cent decline in child poverty since 1998/99 and figures are now at a fifteen-year low. But there has been a recent rise and much is left to do.

The Government has rightly placed the emphasis on getting parents into work plus support through benefits and tax credits. Overall, employment rates are up, more lone parents are working, but too many parents are still in low-skilled, low-wage jobs. The focus of Brown's first hundred days in power needs to be on in-work poverty if he wants to be the leader who really does banish child poverty once and for all. ■

Ann Rossiter, Director, Social Market Foundation

needed to make a real difference to the lives of the poorest families?

A typical example that ATD Fourth World sees far too often is in children and families social work, where clients are overwhelmingly affected by long-term poverty and social exclusion. A mother experiencing anxiety because of a traumatic past and a present characterised by poverty was recognised by social workers as needing long-term therapy in order to meet her baby daughter's needs. However, they believed this was not in the best interests of the child and, rather than wait until after three years of therapy, a more immediate solution needed to be found. The courts, dispensing with the mother's consent, subsequently granted an adoption order.

ATD Fourth World has supported countless families through social work intervention, aimed at the families' parenting capacity, rather than preventing abuse. With the support of a committed worker, families have come through the process with their family intact. For instance, Gary and Vicky both grew up and live in long-term poverty. Their three older children, born when the couple were both young, were taken into care and adopted because of concerns about Gary and Vicky's parenting skills. After the birth of their new baby, the couple lived for three months in an assessment centre, where they were not allowed to be alone with their baby or to close the curtain across the observation window to their bedroom. We worked closely with the assessment centre staff and social workers, helping them to understand the impact of extreme poverty on family life. Support was also given to Gary and Vicky to help them express to social work professionals their aspirations as a family and their plans to achieve these. With ongoing support from us, the family was allowed to continue being assessed in their own home, giving them the best possible opportunity to develop the parenting skills they need in order to bring up their son. Alongside this joy was a touch of sadness from Vicky:

How will I explain to my daughters when they're adults why I was able to bring up their brother, but not them?

The message for the new Prime Minister from those with first-hand experience of poverty is clear and is well summed-up by Annabel, a young single mother who was brought up in the care system:

Poor parents, does not equal poor parenting. Families living in poverty do not want pity or

sympathy, nor do they want the label of lazy scroungers or criminals. They want to be able to be a part of society, contribute to it and have their abilities and resilience recognised. Most of all, they want to be empowered, not forced, to help themselves out of poverty. ■

Matt Davies is National Co-ordinator at ATD Fourth World

¹ *Get Heard*, Social Policy Task Force, 2006, p4

The TUC is an active member of the End Child Poverty Campaign, and we will be hoping that the new Prime Minister announces substantial extra resources for benefits and tax credits. There is nothing wrong with making higher employment central to anti-poverty policies, but this year's disappointing poverty figures prove that the strategy has to include substantial income transfers as well. The TUC has been lobbying the Government to make an extra £4 billion available, and we will be hoping for movement on this when the new Prime Minister has moved next door. ■

Richard Exell, TUC

How to do better

Polly Toynbee

Gordon Brown says he will put social justice at home and abroad at the top of his agenda and at the heart of his government. But as everyone knows, that is so much easier to say than to do.

A glance at the Prime Minister's diary would make most people blanch. Demands on his time and attention, the sheer number of people bending his ear on every conflicting subject under the sun would cause most brains to short-circuit. I once saw Tony Blair's weekly diary: within an hour or two he was talking to George Bush in Washington, to the Irish Taoiseach, meeting a delegation of business people and chairing a cabinet sub-committee discussing child poverty. Between those there were phone calls of all kinds.

That was probably the order of urgency he felt in jumping from one subject to the other. It is exceedingly difficult to give top priority to solving a long-standing intractable problem like child poverty for which there is virtually no vociferous public demand. Blair dealt with that by launching his extraordinary promise to abolish all child poverty by 2020 into the air, forcing himself to a target he had not the slightest idea how to meet. It was a good method, as it certainly made his government do more than it would have done had there been no such benchmark against which he would be judged.

So how can Gordon Brown do better? First, he has to establish his own credibility – and in the current sour climate, that is not easy. Once lost, political trust is hard to regain, but he needs to do it fast by banning donations to political parties above, say, £5,000, and bring in state funding by letting voters tick a box on their ballot papers allocating their share to the party of their choice. Then he needs to bring in proportional representation, although it means

Labour would never rule alone again. That means that the votes of the poor would no longer be wasted in safe seats: every vote in the country is of equal worth for every politician to seek out. Next, an elected Lords would take away all suspicion of corruption and the rich buying ermine.

Once he had put himself into a position where he need not court the wealthy for party funds, he should stay well away from them thereafter. He needs to find the voice, at last, to speak out against obscene wealth, against out-of-control boardroom greed, private equity raiders and a world of riches that has made the country cynical. So far, he has never said a word. He approaches the Mansion House and the City on bended knee, promising more deregulation or less corporation tax. It is time he spoke to them straight about the responsibilities that go with their unfettered rights to buy everything and everyone. There is little traction or credibility in talking about poverty and children's life chances, without at least talking about gross wealth and inequality. Now is the time.

For it will take a lot of persuasion and heavy lifting to bring the unequal way we live now to the top of the popular agenda. It will take speech after speech from himself and all his ministers. There is no way the child poverty goal can be reached unless the public support it. It needs a shift towards a social democratic state of mind, a positive desire to become more Nordic and less American in our economic and social thinking. Of course it can be done, because people already think rewards are out of kilter, but they never hear a politician say so. If he can win the argument, then he can do what needs to be done:

- Keep increasing tax credits above inflation.
- Keep raising the minimum wage above inflation.
- Tax earnings over £100,000 to earmark for an opportunity fund for poor children and everything they need.
- Tax the growth in house values as a capital gain, to slow the market and to earmark the money to aim to make every family a homeowner: the great divide between the 70 per cent with capital and the 30 per cent without is as damaging now as the gap in weekly income.
- Take control of Sure Start back to the centre from often unenthusiastic Tory councils, and fund it generously. See that every family at risk gets all the help they need and every

family in Britain gets a brilliant universal service. Give children's centres all the health visitors, midwives, speech therapists and psychotherapists they need: this cannot be done by the untrained on the cheap.

- Make extended a schools a reality, with universal breakfast and tea clubs, homework help, extra tutoring, sport, art, drama and fun. Like Sure Start, this is often more an idea than a reality: some schools have had only £3,500 extra for this. Give every school the on-site social workers, nurses and counsellors they need. Give every school strong adult education, and the chance for adults and children to learn side by side.
- Put children first in every policy, from transport and street security to flexible working, sport, health, advertising, public spaces, cycle lanes and entertainment.

Take this last point: a society that really put children first would be the society in which everyone would rather live. It would offer safe beautiful streets where children were put before the tyranny of the car, where cycling was easy, safe and fun. A place where bus conductors, station staff on platforms, park keepers, neighbourhood wardens and street cleaners kept an eye out for children – and eye out for bullying – would make everything better for everyone. It just takes rethinking the way we live. A country fit for children should be the new Prime Minister's one over-riding target. ■

Polly Toynbee is an author and journalist

Brown's first days in office provide the opportunity to introduce fresh policies and inject new thinking, and to show he really is the children's anti-poverty champion. It will not be easy. In March we learnt that 100,000 children fell back into poverty and inequality is growing. He must do the following.

- Actively campaign to end child poverty, regularly visiting poorer areas of the UK with local political and business leaders, the super rich and the media. Showing the causes and extent of poverty, raising questions about the huge disparity between the incomes of the rich and poor, challenging attitudes, and talking about what needs to be done to eradicate it.
- Announce that the Government will reach the target of halving child poverty by investing the £4 billion needed now on benefits and child tax credits.
- Announce that the Government will build on the success of the Sure Start children's centres, providing the resources to ensure they are extended.
- Set a date for when there will be parity in spending on children in state and private schools, and announce funding for extra tuition for children from low-income families who are failing.
- Engage with business leaders about reducing in-work poverty through a higher minimum wage, improving the quality and sustainability of jobs, and ensuring part-time work is equitable.
- Commit to building 20,000 additional social rented homes a year, lifting 154,000 children out of bad housing. ■

Hilary Fisher, End Child Poverty