

An interview with Ed Balls



David Toth/DCSF

In the wake of the creation of the new, cross-governmental Child Poverty Unit and the implementation of the Children's Plan, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families Ed Balls MP is optimistic about the future. Labour has done a lot to eradicate child poverty since 1997, he says, and remains the only party with a true commitment to the cause. But the job is far from done. He answers here some questions from Gabrielle Preston.

Question: CPAG welcomes the establishment of the new cross-departmental Child Poverty Unit to provide a single point of contact in government on child poverty issues. What are your top priorities for the new Unit?

Ed Balls: The Unit will co-ordinate work across Government and its overriding priority will clearly be to eradicate child poverty. The Unit will need to look at how best to take forward our work on child poverty and if there are things we need to change. It's vital we have the right direction of travel – so right now my officials are taking stock of existing policy and consulting stakeholders including CPAG.

The team are also looking at the evidence and research base to identify the particular challenges faced by different families living in poverty, identify gaps in our understanding and develop an ongoing programme of research and analysis. They will be sharing the Unit's ongoing work programme with stakeholders in the next few weeks when I know they would welcome input and feedback. We also want to have an open debate with stakeholders as we develop our strategy over the longer term.

However, we need to get leaders and practitioners fully committed to eradicating poverty at a local level, and to understand what difference they can make in their day-to-day work.

Q: The Government missed its first target to reduce child poverty by a quarter by 2004–05, the position worsened in 2005–06, and there

are serious concerns that on current policies and levels of investment the 2010 target cannot be met. What guarantees can you give that it will be met and how will you achieve that?

EB: We have made significant progress with 600,000 children lifted out of relative poverty since 1998–99, the biggest fall of any EU country over this period. And the measures we took in last year's Budget, Pre-Budget Report and Comprehensive Spending Review are expected to lift an extra 300,000 children out of poverty.

I shared the disappointment of CPAG members and other campaigners last year when the child poverty numbers rose by 100,000. But as I said in my speech to the End Child Poverty campaign just before Christmas, I'm clear that we're not going to abandon these goals just because the going has got tough. This is when we need to redouble our efforts and when we need to try even harder. We will need to continue our investment in child benefit and tax credits and support more parents into employment. At the same time – and this is a key area for my new Department – we will invest in public services to stop poverty passing from one generation to the next.

By 2010–11, the Government will spend £2 billion a year more than now in public services to alleviate child poverty and break cycles of deprivation. This includes spending on child-care, schooling in deprived areas, improving educational attainment, tackling health inequal-

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ities and help for disabled children. Over the next three years we will also invest £1 billion of housing spending on housing for families with children. Both the 2010 and 2020 targets are very challenging, but this Government is committed to meeting them and taking further measures to get there.

Q: Since 1997 there has been a massive investment in tax credits, childcare, welfare to work programmes, educational and health initiatives, and yet still 30 per cent of our children grow up below the poverty line. Does the gap between the level of investment and its results suggest a different approach is needed?

EB: All of us who are passionate about ending child poverty are impatient about the rate of progress we can make, but it's clear that the measures this Government has taken have made a huge difference. Without the massive investment and the initiatives you refer to we would have seen a continuing rise, rather than a significant fall, in child poverty.

Tax credits are working and as a result of our reforms to the tax and benefit system since 1997 households with children in the poorest fifth of the population will be, on average, £4,000 a year better off. Peter Hain and now James Purnell have been setting out how we will support more people into employment and, in my Department, our Children's Plan sets out an ambitious vision of how we build on our existing approach to ensure that every child gets the best start in life.

We have committed to increased investment in early years, personalised learning at school, support for parents and opportunities for children and young people to develop their skills outside school. These will all make a difference to the experiences of today's children as they grow up, but also to their opportunities in adult life. It's a long term task, but it's essential to tackle intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

Q: The Government is committed to implementing 'joined-up government', and since 2003, Every Child Matters has been at the heart of government thinking. But the recently published Children's Plan has identified a lack of co-ordination between different departments and services as an ongoing issue. Why is it proving so difficult to generate a holistic approach?

EB: There has indeed been much more joined-up working at a local level thanks to Every Child

Matters. Creating the new Department for Children, Schools and Families strengthens our joined-up working at a national level. The DCSF is, in effect, the Every Child Matters department, having joint responsibility with other departments for key issues including children's health, youth justice, school sport and play. It means that in every area we put the needs of children – and indeed the poorest children – first and foremost.

At both a local and national level, there are always challenges in working across institutional boundaries, but we are determined to break those down. Building on the progress made on delivering the Every Child Matters agenda, the aim of the Children's Plan and the new Department is to put families at the centre of excellent, integrated services that put their needs first, regardless of traditional institutional and professional structures. This means a new leadership role for Children's Trusts in every area, a new role for schools at the centre of their communities, and more effective links between schools, health services and other children's services so that together they can engage parents and tackle all the barriers to the learning, health and happiness of every child.

Later this year the Health Secretary Alan Johnson and I will publish the first ever child health strategy and we've begun a much-needed review of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. We also need a new culture of early intervention – spotting problems early on, rather than trying to take action when it's too late.

Q: CPAG welcomes the publication of the Children's Plan in December, however, research suggests that poorer families are less likely to access and often get a worse deal out of health and educational services than better-off families. How will you avoid these problems being perpetuated?

EB: You're right to highlight this issue. For instance, while most Children's Centres are already providing excellent support to some of the most disadvantaged families, and Sure Start's holistic vision is already a reality in communities up and down the country, there is much more to do. That's why we recently announced additional funding for Children's Centres in the most disadvantaged areas to employ extra outreach workers to ensure that the most hard to reach families can be visited in their own homes, receive parenting support, and are helped to access the other services they need.

Another example is the Family Nurse Partnership. This is an intensive intervention and prevention programme focusing on first time, at risk mothers, primarily under 20, from early pregnancy until the child is two years old. It's based on a programme developed over 30 years in the USA, where the evidence showed improved health and well-being of children and their families. I hope we will see similar results in England over the coming year.

Q: Employment is viewed as the primary route out of poverty, yet disadvantaged groups can often only access low-paid, part-time, erratic jobs. Now the DWP has announced plans to increase lone parent employment or face harsher penalties. CPAG is very concerned that forcing parents to take up poor quality jobs will do nothing to reduce child poverty. How will the Government ensure that children's well-being is put first and that parents have the right to decide what is best for their children?

EB: As Lisa Harker said in her review of child poverty for the DWP, work offers families the best chance of an effective and sustainable route out of poverty. Nearly half of poor children live with a single parent and a significant proportion of our progress so far in tackling child poverty is due to one million more lone parents moving into work.

So if we're going to make more progress on our child poverty goals, we need to do more to help lone parents back into employment. Yes, there will be more obligations on lone parents to seek work actively once their eldest child reaches a certain age. But there will be much more support too, including affordable childcare and services which will help lone parents find, remain and progress in work. There will be training opportunities and we will roll out the 'in work credit' to support lone parents in the difficult transitional period after starting work. Changes announced in the Pre-Budget Report will also mean that lone parents on benefits who receive child maintenance will be able to keep more of it – benefiting some 350,000 children.

Q: Research has found that poorer children are up to a year behind their better-off peers in their development by the time they are three. What do you think is the source of these startling and depressing findings and what sort of support do you think families need before, during, and after the birth of their child?

EB: Every child should have an equal chance,

no matter what their background. That's why breaking the historic link between poverty and disadvantage is a key mission of my Department and why we have a new Public Service Agreement to narrow the gap in educational achievement between children from poorer backgrounds and their better-off peers.

But it's no good waiting until children get to school, because by then it is often too late. As you point out, life chances are still determined in those first months of a child's life. That's why our investment in good quality early years services is so critical. We've established pioneering multi-agency Sure Start programmes in our most disadvantaged communities, and by the end of the year we'll have 2,500 Children's Centres across the country. To be most effective, they will need to do more to reach out to the most disadvantaged families and we're putting in place extra resources to make this happen.

Building on the free early years provision, we've introduced for all three- and four-year-olds, the Children's Plan announced £100 million of funding to extend this to 20,000 two-year-olds in the most disadvantaged communities.

We also recognise just how critical the months during and just after pregnancy can be. The Healthy Start scheme gives pregnant mothers and families with young children on low incomes vouchers for fresh fruit, vegetables, infant formula milk, vitamin supplements and advice about healthy eating and breastfeeding. Building on this, we are going to pay universal child benefit to all expectant mums from the 29th week of pregnancy.

Q: Research also indicates that, irrespective of their abilities, poorer children do systematically worse at school than their better-off peers. This suggests that the educational system is compounding rather than redressing disadvantage. What is going wrong?

EB: I want every child to fulfil their true potential. While GCSE results are actually rising faster for children entitled to free school meals than the average, poorer children are still only half as likely to get five good GCSE passes. So while we have made some progress on narrowing the attainment gap, there's still a long way to go. As I said already, this is a historic problem we need to solve and, while part of this is about the early years, what happens at school is crucial too.

While standards have risen significantly over the last ten years, there are still too many children

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leaving school without good qualifications. That's why we're introducing more one-to-one and small group tuition to provide more intensive support where needed. We're significantly raising the level of funding in state schools: in 2011, it will be £6,600 per pupil, doubling in real terms since 1997–98 when funding per pupil was just £2,340. Also, our funding formula will continue to provide for schools in deprived areas and in areas with significant pockets of deprivation.

We also need to give young people a range of options. Our new Diplomas will combine theoretical and practical subjects like Engineering and Construction, as well as Sciences and Languages, helping to break the old divide between academic and vocational qualifications. We also plan to raise the education and training age to 18 and boosting work-based learning with a big expansion of apprenticeships for 16- and 17-year-olds.

Q: The opposition is increasingly using the rhetoric – and sometimes the actual policies – put in place by the Government to inform their own agenda and manifestos, for example around welfare to work policies. What are the differences between Labour and the other parties, and how will you present these differences to the electorate?

EB: There are fundamental differences between the parties, particularly in my policy areas. Over many years the Conservative Party has opposed the minimum wage, tax credits and Labour's extra investment in public services. It took the Tories seven years to say they supported the child poverty targets we set in 1999. But even now they only call it an 'aspiration' rather than a pledge, and have failed to set out any policies that would actually tackle poverty. In fact they've attacked the Children's Plan, while their marriage tax plans will treat as second-class millions of children whose parents are widowed, separated or divorced. The Lib Dems have also only recently said they support our ambitious child poverty goals – yet they too have opposed all the reforms that have reduced child poverty over recent years like tax credits, the minimum wage and the New Deal.

I believe there is still a deep divide in British politics between, on the one hand, laissez-faire conservatives who do not accept collective responsibility and would cut public investment and expect charities to step in to fill the gap, and on the other hand, progressives who believe in rights and responsibilities and know

that a cohesive society requires a supportive Government, working with a strengthened voluntary sector to guarantee justice for all.

Q: It is sometimes argued that the problem in the UK is not the existence of massive wealth but high levels of poverty. But the negative impact of poverty – on people's health and children's well-being – is greatly compounded by high levels of inequality. Do inequalities have an impact on the aspirations of poor parents and their children, and should the Government do more to address inequality?

EB: I don't want to live in a society where inequality is rising and where there are huge gaps between the haves and have-nots. For all the progress we have made, I recognise we need to go a lot further to create a fairer society and ensure opportunity is available for all.

There is still a culture of low aspirations in many communities, and it is a huge job to turn that around. It cannot be right that every year thousands of young people leave school at 16 without any opportunities to learn more. That's why we'll make sure all young people stay on at school or college, get an apprenticeship or are in work with at least one day per week's training until the age of 18. We also recognise the important role parents play and we are taking steps in the Children's Plan to ensure that they are more involved in their children's education, particularly at secondary school.

Q: There are concerns that progress on child poverty is being undermined as an electoral issue because of a lack of understanding and sympathy among the public, the press and practitioners about what poverty means in the UK. How would you persuade a skeptic of the existence of poverty in the UK, and could the Government do more to inculcate a wider sense of understanding and outrage about its existence in such a wealthy society?

EB: Is it fair that someone's life chances can be blighted by growing up in poverty? I'd argue strongly that it's not, and I suspect most people in the UK would agree. Fairness is the essential underpinning to our approach and should always be part of the argument we make about child poverty to the wider public. There are also compelling economic and social arguments for eradicating child poverty. As a nation, we cannot afford to waste the talents of any of our children and young people and as a society we all benefit when communities and families are strong and cohesive. ■