

# Poverty, Shame and Social Exclusion

## Work Package 3

### **‘It must be true – I read it in the news!’. Representations of UK poverty in British national newspapers 2006-2012**

**Elaine Chase**

**Robert Walker**

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Professor Robert Walker, Department of Social Policy and Intervention, Oxford Institute of Social Policy, Barnett House 32 Wellington Square, OX1 2ER

[robert.walker@spi.ox.ac.uk](mailto:robert.walker@spi.ox.ac.uk)

Dr. Elaine Chase, Department of Social Policy and Intervention, Oxford Institute of Social Policy,

[elaine.chase@spi.ox.ac.uk](mailto:elaine.chase@spi.ox.ac.uk)



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## Introduction

This report presents an analysis of newspaper coverage of poverty in the UK over a five year period. It was conducted as part of a wider ESRC/DFID – funded research project: *Poverty, shame and social exclusion: A comparative study in seven countries*. The overall project is comprised of four main components, conducted sequentially in each of the seven countries (China, India, Norway, Pakistan, South Korea, Uganda, UK): an analysis of cultural norms and values of poverty (explored through popular literature and film); an examination of the views and perspectives of people living in poverty; an exploration of the wider dominant public perceptions surrounding poverty (elicited via a combination of group discussions with the general public and the current media analysis); and a review of anti-poverty policies. Previous phases of the research had revealed a firm link between perceptions of poverty in the UK and the receipt of welfare. For this reason, the key research terms employed for the analysis using Nexis (see below) were ‘poverty’ and ‘welfare’.

## Methodology

Using the Nexis database (a system providing electronic access to more than 20,000 global news sources) - a thematic analysis of national (UK) newspaper coverage of two key search terms ‘Poverty’ and ‘welfare’ was completed for a 12 week period spanning just over five years. A stratified random sample of weeks was selected between 01-07 December 2006 and 01-07 January 2012, ensuring that it incorporated all months of the year, a selection of the four weeks over any one month and all seven days of the week.

Twenty four sets of data were compiled (one for ‘poverty’ and one for ‘shame’ for each randomly selected week). These datasets were then subdivided into categories of news, letters and features. The key interrogative questions for the data were:

- 1) What key themes are reflected in the media with respect to poverty and welfare in the UK over the selected time period?
- 2) In what ways (if at all) do these themes reflect the poverty-shame nexus explored within the wider research project?

## Sample

The articles were all taken from national newspapers (including editions published in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Eire). Table 1 provides an overview of the circulation/readership figures of each of the newspapers included in the analysis. This demonstrates that the tabloid newspapers have been consistently the most read over the time period. Of the four newspapers with the highest circulation, two of these (The Sun and the Daily Mail) represent a political stance Right of centre, and generally pro the Conservative party; one (The Daily Mirror) tends to have political allegiance to the Left and one (The Daily Star) publishes few political articles, predominantly focusing on popular media and ‘celebrity gossip’, although the articles read as part of the analysis tended to sit to the Right of the political spectrum. The Daily Telegraph and the Daily Express have a similar sized circulation and both have traditionally supported the Conservative party, the exception being the backing of the Labour party by The Daily Express in the 2001 general election. The Times, has tended to fluctuate its political allegiance and, despite backing the Labour party under Tony Blair in the 2001 and 2005 general elections, it came out in support of the Conservatives in 2010. The Guardian, traditionally attracting left of centre and predominantly middle-class voters, in fact supported the Liberal Democrats in the 2010 election (reportedly due to the party’s campaign for electoral reform), a move presented as tactical in an attempt to prevent the Conservative party winning the election. The Independent, established in 1986, was designed to attract the middle of political spectrum voters though it is considered to be somewhat left-leaning, attracting similar readership to

the Guardian. The Morning Star (see note below table) has the smallest circulation and is a Left wing daily tabloid, mainly presenting the views of the trade unions on social and economic issues.

The search for ‘welfare’ in each randomly selected week generated an average of ^^articles. These were then trawled to eliminate all those irrelevant to the analysis, such as ‘animal welfare’ etc. A similar process was conducted using the search ‘poverty’ which produced an average of ^^articles. The focus was on poverty in the UK, so that articles relevant to poverty in other countries were eliminated. Where appropriate, articles reflecting UK government stance on international poverty as part of a wider political/ethical philosophy were incorporated in the analysis.

**Table 1: Circulation since 2000 of key newspapers included in the analysis (Average circulations for January each year: Source: Audit Bureau of circulations)**

Title	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006
The Sun	2,582,301	3,001,822	3,006,565	3,146,006	3,209,766	3,217,844	3,319,337
Daily Mail	1,945,496	2,136,568	2,120,347	2,200,398	2,313,908	2,354,028	2,389,011
Daily Mirror	1,102,810	1,194,097	1,218,425	1,366,891	1,512,599	1,621,000	1,727,672
Daily Star	617,082	734,311	779,376	768,534	722,969	777,637	820,070
Evening Standard		704,008	601,960	237,403	294,823	276,562	337,080
Daily Telegraph	578,774	651,184	691,128	783,210	890,086	911,454	917,943
Daily Express	577,543	639,875	674,640	736,340	752,699	771,325	849,001
The Times	397,549	457,250	508,250	617,483	633,718	670,054	685,081
The Guardian	215,988	279,308	302,285	358,844	378,394	384,070	394,913
The Independent	105,160	185,035	185,815	215,504	250,641	263,503	258,387

\* Circulation figures available for the Morning Star (featuring frequently in the analysis) are not included in the Audit Bureau data. However, the paper was estimated by the Guardian to have a print run of some 26,000 in 2006 and since then circulation appears to have fluctuated, largely contingent on available funding.

## Findings

The following sections of the report lay out a thematic analysis of key news reports, features and letters/opinions emerging across the sample of papers over the five year period. Interestingly very similar debates ebb and flow over time, appearing in slightly different guises but centred on the same issues. Periodic events, such as published reports from think tanks, budgets, political manifestos or headline, usually ‘shocking’, events tend to generate a ripple effect across the range of newspapers but notably return to a series of recurrent themes (as outlined below).

### Perceived causes of poverty – the ‘*deserving poor*’

The prevalence across the media (apart from those newspapers sitting to the left of centre) of seeing the root cause of poverty as unemployment fundamentally polarises the poverty

discourse. Hence a seamless connection is frequently drawn between those living in poverty and those in receipt of welfare benefits. This connection is so strong that most political debate and analysis centres on the solution to poverty through the adjustments to the welfare state and measures to '*reduce dependency*'. There is consistency in this assertion across most media coverage, with the exception of the Daily Mirror, the Guardian and The Morning Star, even when economic conditions are severe (and might offer an alternative explanation for poverty). The emphasis on individual failings, rather than structural causes, accounting for poverty generates a symbiotic cycle of media furore and political rhetoric. Hence the prominent view that welfare '*dependency*' and poverty are intertwined; and that the root cause of poverty is not working, are hugely pervasive, generating an echo across political and media discourses and looped back via the public's response to these ideas, presented through letters and opinion pieces.

This said, there are some important distinctions to be made. Certain forms or types of poverty generate more collective sympathy than others. '*Pensioner poverty*' and '*child poverty*' attract the widest public support and, to some extent, collective anger and resistance (despite rising scepticism in some media and political circles that children are used as a mask to further political gains). Issues such as '*fuel poverty*', and especially when it affects older people, poor families and children, are also more likely to be attributed to causes outside of people's control, such as unregulated providers and exorbitant price hikes in gas and electricity. Equally, as the recession (defined as consistent falls in GDP) began to take hold from around the middle of 2008, a degree of sympathy began to emerge for the '*ordinary worker*' hit by the economic impact of the recession. In May 2008, a news piece by Emma Wall in the Daily Star (03/05/08) warned that a record number of people had been bankrupt in the first three months of the year, with up to a projected 130,000 people facing insolvency by the end of the year. This was largely attributable to a rise in cost of living by around 9%, an increase in petrol prices by 18% and energy bills by 13%, combined with rising food prices and council tax bills. By August The Independent (16/10/08) reported official figures revealing the biggest rise in unemployment for 17 years and acknowledged an inevitable rise in welfare expenditure to accommodate the needs of the newly unemployed. The Daily Mail (16/10/08), among other papers, reported that some 100,000 public sector workers risked losing their jobs. Equally, key events such as the collapse of the Farepak Christmas savings club in October 2006 and UNISON's subsequent report of the resultant debt incurred by some 150,000, mainly women subscribers, received widespread sympathetic media support.

### *Fuel poverty*

Fuel poverty (defined as spending 10% or more of disposable income on heating or lighting) emerged sporadically as a theme across the period of analysis, generating a certain degree of public uproar above all when it affected older people. More broadly however it is an aspect of poverty which tends to drum up collective political support both from government and shadow ministers and from specific lobby groups. In Scotland much of the debate centred around the ample supply of North Sea oil on the one hand and the unregulated fuel prices charged by the leading five providers on the other. Alex Salmond in the Times challenged Gordon Brown to a by-election debate specifically on fuel poverty (16/10/08).

One aspect of fuel poverty which re-emerged on a cyclical basis was the failure of governments to increase fuel payments to older people. Gordon Brown for example was widely criticised by Melvyn Kholer of Help the Aged (Daily Telegraph, 07/12/06) for doing '*nothing for one in five pensioners living below the poverty line*', and equally by other NGOs for failing to deliver promises on increases in minimum pensions and heating allowances. In Scotland, in the same week, the 10 year freeze in fuel payments was criticised as the '*scrooge-like behaviour*' of Great Britain. The Daily Mail, however, defended Brown, claiming

that he had in fact called on leading energy suppliers to offer greater discounts and launch a rebate scheme for pensioners and those on low incomes (06/12/06).

By 2008, headlines reported a projected rise in utility bills of between 30-40% (The Independent, 07/05/08), and once again the government's ineffectual energy policy was criticised for not helping those facing the brunt of the prices. Jeremy Warner in the Business section of The Independent condemned the government for concentrating on the '*meaningless targeting of so-called "energy poverty"*', rather than addressing the underlying rising energy costs. Such rises, according to the Mail on Sunday (04/05/08) would mean an estimated further million households pushed into fuel poverty. The Sun (16/10/08) announced a '*heat or eat*' alert, claiming that 3.6 million pensioners would have to face the choice of heating their homes or eating, largely as a result of soaring energy costs.

By July 2011, rising fuel prices once again dominated the media and newspapers to the Left and Right were largely in agreement in terms of the injustice of the situation of unregulated prices for customers and rising profit margins for suppliers. The Scottish edition of The Sun (22/07/11) identified a new category of '*extreme fuel poverty*' (20% of income spent on heating and lighting), said to be affecting tens of thousands of people in Scotland. A letter in the Express (Scotland Edition, 22/07/11) accused the Scottish government of failing to tackle the issue of overpriced gas and electricity costs to the consumer while '*maintaining its cosy relationship with the power giants*'. Similarly, a Letter in the Guardian (20/07/11) signed by a consortium of NGOs described the news that 5.5 million people were now facing fuel poverty as '*shocking and distressing*, and called on government to rethink the energy bill which looked to cut the warm front grants for the most vulnerable households.

#### *Older people*

Older people facing poverty are, on the whole, respected and supported across the media and equally are given a fairly strong collective voice through key organisations such as the National Pensioners Convention and Age UK (previously Help the Aged). In 2008, for example, responding to an OECD report on pension provisions, a letter in the Morning Star from the pensioners association (03/05/08) claimed that '*as far as pensions go, we are the paupers of the industrial world with only Japan, Ireland and Mexico behind us*'.

In October of the same year, The Morning Star (15 & 16/10/08) reported on The National Pensioners Convention's in a series of articles highlighting the rising poverty of older people as a result of inflation (at 5.2%) and rising prices. It broadcast the Convention's call for the government to move beyond bailing out the '*City fat cats*' and provide support to those struggling to make ends meet. Such demands included an immediate increase in the state pension following a government announcement that pensions would rise by just 5% in April 2009 (amounting to an increase of just £4.54 a week for a single pensioner). These demands were on the back of previous criticisms that the government had destroyed a pension scheme '*envied by many other countries*' (one pensioner writing to the Daily Mail, 07/12/06) and ONS statistics revealing that record numbers of older people were continuing to work long past retirement age in order to avoid retirement into poverty (Daily Telegraph, 06/12/06). In October 2009, John Husband in the business section of The Mirror (15/10/08) launched a campaign to '*give the elderly a fair deal*', claiming that official figures of inflation at 5% hid the fact that the real rate of inflation for older people was far higher since such a large proportion of their income was spent on fuel and food. In a similar vein, The Mirror (25/08/10) reported that a total of 23% of the elderly in Northern Ireland were living in poverty compared to 16% across the UK, and called for further protection on benefits such as winter fuel payments.

#### *Child and youth poverty*

Child poverty frequently becomes a political pawn in many of the rhetorical debates surrounding anti-poverty policies. The potential impact on children of the actions of parents, schools, politicians and policies are regularly highlighted across the political spectrum. Children provide the emotive strand to policy discourse and hence are used deftly to support or counter political positioning concerning many aspects of welfare provision including education, housing benefit, tax credits etc.

### *Poverty and education*

The connection between poverty and poor educational opportunities for children and young people is drawn repeatedly throughout the media coverage over the time period analysed. Such debates are inevitably intertwined with varying constructions of equality and inequality, depending on the political stance of the narrators.

Part of the government's campaign in 2006 to end child poverty was a pledge to make the education system the best in the world and provide billions of pounds in extra funding for children's centres, schools, colleges and universities and greater investment in vocational skills and science (The Times, 07/12/06) - *'with five million functionally illiterate adults and 17 million struggling with numbers, Britain lags far behind competitors in basic skills'*. The driver was therefore economic competition and the need to keep up with the financial giants such as China and India. A few years later, Louisa Peacock in the Daily Telegraph (08/02/11) cited Chris Grayling (Employment Minister) who accused the education system of failing to *'prepare teenagers for the world of work'* with the consequence of *'too many young people ending up in a lost generation of unemployment and benefits'*. The imminent launch of a new Work Programme (in June 2011) he said, would replace back-to-work schemes with a system whereby welfare providers are *'paid by results'* for the number of people they get into sustainable jobs.

Inherent in much of the debate surrounding poor educational outcomes is the role of parents and families, and the extent to which they are fit for purpose. Much of the education debate in the media of the 08-14 February 2011 was a spin off from the report by Michael Marmot, professor of epidemiology and public health at UCL which cited stark inequalities in children's health and development across local authorities. It claimed that some 60% of five year olds in some of the poorest areas of Britain failed to reach a 'good' level of behaviour and understanding. Janet Street Porter, writing in the Independent on Sunday (13/02/11) commented, *'the high level of underachievement at primary schools has nothing to do with central heating or modern lighting but stems directly from poverty and poor parenting skills'*. Quoting the report written by Michael Marmot, that *'poverty means under achievement at school, a shorter life and more illness'*, Porter condemned Michael Gove's proposed cutting of resources for the early years such as SureStart and Children's Centres. Tim Montgomerie (editor of Conservative Home, and writing in the Sunday Telegraph 13/02/11) praised the Conservative educational policies stating that , *'the poorest are getting 15 hours of free pre-school learning... Labour fought poverty by spending money on welfare, but Cameron, Clegg and Gove believe, rightly, that what really matters is a stable home , a good education and the chance to work'*.

Inequality in educational access recurs? as an important theme across all key stages of education. A piece in the Morning Star (28/08/10) drew on a Barnardo's report which accused middle class parents living in areas of *'impenetrable clusters of privilege'*, and of *'gaming the admissions system'* with the result of excluding poor families from sending their children to the best schools. The report claimed that state schools at the top of the league table were admitting on average just 5% of children eligible to free school meals and that faith-based schools were most likely to exclude children from poorer backgrounds. A news piece in The Express in the same week (27/08/10) said that poverty accounted for one in five seven year-olds being unable to write properly, with the lowest performances linked to areas

of deprivation. In April 2009, for example, much disquiet emerged with respect to what was labelled '*poverty of speech*', with new measures announced by Michael Gove for educational reform to address these through the teaching of articulation and clear speech.

Harriet Sergeant writing in the Daily Mail on the previous day (26/08/10), however, criticised David Willetts of being a '*Stalinist social engineer*', following his suggestion that young people from poorer backgrounds should be assisted into higher education by more flexible entry criteria. Blaming poor educational outcomes and low social mobility on Labour government educational policies, Sergeant cautioned against what she considered the unfair repercussions for '*middle class kids*' who would find it more difficult to access university places. This same debate was revisited several months later in The Daily Telegraph (08/02/11), highlighting Nick Clegg's support to '*fair access*' plans to higher education, including imposing higher entry requirements for private than state school pupils; '*universities should be our greatest agent of social mobility*' rather than '*instruments of social segregation*'.

A recurrent concern in the media focuses on youth poverty along with their lack of training and employment opportunities. In 2006 a reported 13% of young people were designated as not in education, employment or training (NEET). While there was at times a sympathetic response to their difficulties, equally young people were intermittently vilified in the media and portrayed largely as not wanting to work, drawn to celebrity lifestyles and gang culture yet lacking individual ambition (e.g The Sun, October 2008). In 2010 an essay in the Daily Mail by Ed Howker and Shiv Malik slammed the media for their demonising of young people, '*we inspire fear and contempt. Our behaviour seen as a constant threat to society – binge drinking, teenage pregnancy, drugs or knife crime*'. Yet, they claim, the reality of young people's lives is rarely addressed; the fact that they are squeezed out of jobs, forced to do unpaid internships and have become '*migrants within their own country*', as they move around looking for affordable accommodation. Inevitably, the assertions targeted at young people provoke a degree of divisiveness in their response, in this case towards both older people and migrant workers. Firstly, the authors assert, while the largest proportion of the welfare bill is spent on older people, they as '*teenage mothers and unemployed youths*' are blamed for the cost of welfare. Secondly, they feel they have poor prospects of work due to the government's '*open door policy*' on mass immigration which intensifies competition and drives down pay scales.

In the Guardian (08/02/11) Salma Yaqoob, vice chair of the Respect Party, took issue at David Cameron's speech against Islamic extremism, a speech, she said, '*wholeheartedly endorsed by the leader of the BNP*'. She went on, '*the 70% cut to our youth service budget (within Birmingham Sparkbrook Community) will do more to unpick community cohesion than any threat of hate-spewing Muslim bigots*'.

#### *Ex-service soldiers*

Decommissioned soldiers have also emerged intermittently within the category of the 'deserving' poor, their cause taken up mainly by the Sun newspaper. In November 2007, for example The Sun (21/11/07) drew attention to the high rates of homelessness experienced by ex-soldiers and the fact that some 3,800 were diagnosed with a mental health problem. They demonstrated their support for the soldiers' plight by the launch of the 'Help for Heroes' campaign. In April 2009, Melissa van der Klugt wrote a news piece for The Times (25/04), again citing the lack of support for people leaving the army and drawing attention to some 1,000 homeless veterans in the UK.

#### *Women*

There was limited focus in the media specifically on how poverty affected women and/or men differently. Janet Street Porter writing in the Daily Mail (14/02/11) asked, '*Women have so much to lose, so why aren't we on the march*'. Women, she reported, had the least access to pensions or higher paid employment, were disproportionately affected by local authority job cuts (with 84,000 female council workers facing redundancy) and, on drawing their pensions, were penalised for having raised families - '*since when did breeding the next generation mean that you had to suffer poverty in old age*'.

The Observer home pages (13/02/11) claimed that thousands of young female public sector workers faced losing their jobs once council cuts began to be introduced. Figures showed that unemployment rates among young women (18-24 years) had risen much faster than for men over the preceding two years. The long-term effects of unemployment early on in life would leave a legacy of long-term low wages and a higher risk of further worklessness. Yvette Cooper (shadow Minister for women and equality) warned of the devastating long-term effects of cutting so many jobs for women; '*It is unfair, bad for the economy and increases child poverty*'. Within the wider context, the government was said to have cut the budget to the Women's National Commission and the Equality and Human Rights Commission by 38%.

Becky Barrow, Business Correspondent in the Daily Mail (12/02/11) highlighted a DWP report showing the plight of millions of women facing poverty in old age due to an '*archaic*' pension system which penalised women for taking time off to have children. The same story was picked up by Sarah O'Grady in The Express (12/02/11) in which she cited that women would receive on average £50,000 less than men in pension payments and that their pension age was likely to increase by six years. This was a result not only of taking time out to have children but because many employers had previously excluded part-time workers from contribution pension schemes. An article a couple of days earlier in the Express had also emphasised women's limited financial protection, with few having any savings, one in three no pension and more than half no life insurance, many consequently facing '*a retirement in poverty*'.

### *Family poverty*

Prevailing debates emerge over who fairs better in budgets, with quite a lot of coverage, particularly from the Right wing press, asserting that married couples are penalised more than single parents. In May 2008 there was uproar, for example, following a report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that couples with children had to work three times as many hours than single mothers to stay above the poverty line (Daily Mail, 06/05/08). Equally the Right wing press tends to extol the virtues of marriage with single parent families, and especially single mothers, repeatedly vilified for their social position. Jill Kirby in a piece in the Daily Telegraph (09/02/11) entitled '*Marriage makes up all richer- not poorer*', praised Iain Duncan Smith for his efforts to halt the decline of marriage through promoting relationship education and '*tackling the couple penalty in the welfare system*'. James Chapman, political editor of the Daily Mail in the same week (08/02/11) defended the actions of couples who pretended not to live together to maximise their incomes, claiming that the system was '*turning committed young couples into fraudsters*' and launched a scathing attack on Labour for creating what has become known as the '*couple penalty*'. Importantly, therefore, while those not working are widely criticised across the media, married couples are presented as the bastion of core family values, their worklessness apparently put to one side in order to make the point.

One of the greatest difficulties highlighted for families in recent years has been the soaring cost of childcare. Fiona McIntosh writing in the Sunday Mirror (13/02/11) stated '*it's now so tough to find decent childcare and keep a job, it's as if there's a Tory conspiracy to keep women chained to the sink and below the poverty line where we belong*'. She commented



that combined with axing of child benefits and the closure of children's centres the Tories '*look as about as family-friendly as Pol Pot*', the '*Old Etonians*' having '*no idea how tough it is for families to cope*'. Likewise the Guardian (09/02/11) reported that nursery charges were rising twice as quickly as wages and that there were growing concerns about government plans to reduce the childcare element of the working tax credit (reducing the proportion of payment of childcare costs from 80% to 70% in April 2012). There were fears expressed by voluntary sector groups that this would affect the take up of nursery places of the most vulnerable families'.

### *Housing*

A feature by Liz Davies in the Morning Star (24/08/10) cited the repeated attacks on council housing meted out first by the Thatcher government, then New Labour and currently the Tories as '*demolishing the vision for social justice*'. With 40% of council housing stock sold off in 1980 alongside deregulation of the private rental sector, the abolition of rent controls and security of tenure, the article refers to David Cameron's latest statement that people should not see council houses as '*homes for life*'. With 1.8 million people waiting for council or housing association homes, Davies declares this '*as dangerous an onslaught on social housing as Thatcher's was 30 years ago*'. Cameron had just proposed limited five-year lets on social housing, with an expectation for occupants to vacate them if they acquired a well-paid job or the house became under-occupied, Davies retorted with, '*not much incentive for getting a good job if the price is losing your home. Instead, it's a ratcheting up of the poverty trap*'.

Phillip Blond (Director of ResPublica) in a piece in the Observer (29/08/10), however, alleged that housing had represented the division between those with property that could be passed on from one generation to the next and those in '*social housing*' who pass no property on to children and so '*ensure permanent serfdom*'. He went further to suggest that needs-based allocation of affordable housing had '*built up concentration of deprivation which further erodes family structures and haemorrhages aspiration and capacity, while housing benefit has conspired to render entry to employment uneconomic for many*'. Blond concluded his piece in support of Iain Duncan Smith and Lord Freud's universal credit on three counts: its underlying principle that '*work always pays*'; the Big Society which he saw as offering '*the poor*' the chance to build networks which could transform their communities; and '*Red Toryism*', through which mutualism and social enterprise allowed '*the poor*' to '*make their own jobs by capturing the public and private supply chains that currently deliver their goods and services*'. Combined, these approaches, he claimed could create an asset base to end poverty, something which '*welfarism*' had never achieved.

From a different side of the political spectrum, the Chief Executive of Shelter (the leading charity on homelessness in the UK) told Rosemary Bennett in The Times (11/02/11) that housing remained '*the neglected part of the welfare state*'. She highlighted the potential impact of '*slashing*' housing benefit from October and predicted large increases in homelessness and overcrowding. Furthermore, cuts in legal aid limited legal recourse and appeals for those made homeless and the public sector cuts meant that Shelter's body of advice workers would be axed. She estimated that some two million people living in the rented sector pay for it on their credit card and were only just managing to pay rents each month, the housing benefit cuts risking them ending up on the streets.

By January 2012, Randeep Ramesh, Social Affairs correspondent in the Guardian (02/01/12) reported that a further 800,000 homes would be unaffordable for people on housing benefits as a result of the welfare cuts. He warned that '*the poor*' especially in South-East England could end up in '*benefit ghettos*' with ensuing '*increased social problems and a breakdown in community cohesion*'. Sue Reid in the Daily Mail (07/01/12)

took a different stance, *'for years you've paid their £2,000 a week rents. But the housing gravy train's hit the buffers, leaving these families to face an overdue dose of reality'*.

### *Inequalities and 'the working poor'*

Inequality is a theme largely promulgated by the Guardian and the Independent (occasionally by The Times and The Independent) and couched more succinctly as 'exploitation' by publications such as The Morning Star. These papers tended to highlight key issues of inequality largely ignored by other sections of the media. A comment in the Guardian (15/10/08), for example, reflected the irony of the fact that Glasgow was listed as the Lonely Planet's world top 10 cities, despite the fact that *'the index of multiple deprivation offers a list of Glasgow postcodes where almost every health indicator is sub-east European...and the levels of poverty and despair are in a different league'*. A later news piece in the Sunday Times (26/04/09) by Julia Belgutay revealed that Glasgow was also the 'Prozac capital of Scotland'. Similarly, Zoe Williams writing in the Guardian comment and debates pages (Guardian 22/04/09) exposed the flaws in the strategy to address epidemic levels of obesity in the UK and its failure to recognise the link between poverty and being overweight. *'Every policy idea you hear shares this easy-answer; take away their benefits, restrict their use of the NHS, tax their chocolate, tax their benefits so they can't afford chocolate, starve them'*, thus ignoring the real issues at stake, *'boredom, hopelessness, demoralisation and a low sense of self-worth'*.

May 2008 saw a fairly united attempt by the unions to address work-based exploitation. This followed a report by the TUC-sponsored Commission on Vulnerable Employment exposing shocking evidence of some two million workers being exploited. The report made many recommendations to government for greater regulation of temp agencies, 'gangmasters' and false self-employment schemes. It revealed a grim picture of long hours, low wage, a hire and fire culture, few basic safety provisions and limited law enforcement to protect people. The Fawcett Society pointed out how women made up 62% of vulnerable workers in roles such as homeworkers, cleaners and carers. The Morning Star, the Guardian and the Observer all picked up the story. A piece in the comment and debate pages in the Guardian (05/05/08) spoke of how *'low-paid, insecure employment has flourished like some rapacious mould'*. The piece acknowledged the gains that Brown and the Labour party had made with respect to child poverty but that the extent of working poverty has been largely obscured.

The piece drew attention to the fact that the number of children living in poverty in working households remained at 1.4 million, exactly the same figure as in 1997. These were 'hard working' families that are *'scrabbling to make ends meet'*. Amelia Hill (Social Affairs Correspondent) for the Observer summarised the report as revealing *'a hidden Britain where those providing the services on which society and the economy rely are trapped in a cycle of poverty and injustice'*. In April 2009, an OECD report predicted that by 2020 some two thirds of the world's population would be employed without contracts or social protection as the global recession increasingly forced people into low-paid work (The Times, 24/04/09)

### **The undeserving poor**

While the categories of poverty and those experiencing it outlined in the previous section were met with a degree of sympathy and support, albeit lacking in uniformity across the political spectrum, others were met with a largely disparaging response by the media.

### *People in receipt of welfare*

People in receipt of state benefits, and particularly out of work welfare benefits were regularly the focus of disapproval across the sample of newspaper coverage. However, as well as being blamed for their situations, those in receipt of benefits frequently became

pawns in political crossfire. The idea of the Labour government having created welfare machinery which entraps those who enter was a repeated analogy. The Home Affairs editor in the Daily Telegraph, Philip Johnston (07/12/06) in 2006, for example, accused the government of creating a *'client nation of supplicants who have cash taken from them and then returned in the form of tax credits delivered through a system so complex and incompetently-handled that millions find it more attractive to stay at home rather than go to work'*. A piece by Martin Townsend, the Editor of the Sunday Express (24/04/09) drew a comparison between poverty in the UK and Egypt and concluded, *'In Britain the levels of poverty some of these people suffer is virtually nonexistent. Yet for much of the time, it seems, vast numbers of our population, many of whom will have contributed little or nothing to the public exchequer, are seeking some sort of hand-out'*. In this way, he claimed, the Labour government *'creates thousands more dependants willing to go to the polls and vote for them'* and an *'everything for free culture'*

The mantra of the unemployed *'not wanting to work'* is continually echoed over time and space. A piece in the Daily Mail's (Scotland edition, 15/10/08) claimed that *'half of long-term unemployed Scots do not want to return to work....the findings expose the myth that most dole claimants are stuck in the poverty trap, desperate for a job'*. Based on research with unemployed people, the article claimed that most did not want to swap the *'easy life of bumper housing, incapacity and unemployment benefits for the real world of hard graft'*, citing childcare, health issues and lack of self-esteem and confidence as *'excuses'* for not returning to work.

Throughout the period of media coverage, what we might call stereostories were employed, notably by certain newspapers such as the Daily Express, the Daily Mail and the Sun. These were presented as archetypes, epitomising the contrary political, social or moral position assumed by the publication. People receiving benefits frequently became the protagonists of these stereostories; A Daily Star column (15/10/08), for example, dubbed Tracy and Harry Crompton, reportedly unemployed for 15 years, *'scroungers who would need to be earning around £70,000 to live like this if they had jobs'*. The piece concluded with *'our welfare system is a joke'*.

The week of 03-9 September 2009 saw the start of election campaigning in the ten month run up to the general election (2010). With a backdrop of recession, the media debate inevitably turned to cuts in public spending and the positioning of the two main contestants. Two articles in the news section of the Daily Telegraph (09/09/09) drew attention to the need for the Conservatives to review their financial plans in light of the recession. George Osborne (shadow Chancellor), stated the Daily Telegraph, was in a position to make cuts where Labour could not and to instigate a *'root and branch'* reform of the welfare state. An article on the previous day alluded to David Cameron's *'tough love'* approach, and his intention to impose stringent sanctions on those not willing to work. The Express leader column on the same day spoke of the priority to get Britain back to gainful employment, referring to the *'millions of habitual welfare claimants'* who must be taken off the *'intravenous drip of tax payer support and made to earn their keep'*. Alistair Darling (Labour Chancellor) was said to be resisting cuts, arguing instead that the timing was wrong and that cutting back on public spending would undermine any promise of economic recovery. When the time came, he said, cuts would be made according to the values of *'fairness and justice'* (The Times, 09/09/09).

Language surrounding recipients of benefits employed by the media was predominantly derogatory throughout the period of analysis, with a few exceptions. Bill Kid, Member of the Scottish Parliament, for example, writes a column under 'Voices of Scotland' in the Morning Star. He regularly criticises government for *'tarring every claimant with the same coat of guilty laziness until you prove yourself innocent'* (22/11/07), posing the question *'are you one of the deserving poor'* or should you be categorised as *'one of the fat people with acne'*.

Similarly, papers like the Guardian focus on countering the ‘stereostory and presenting a ‘human’ face of the welfare recipient – such as the piece about a single parent with one child in Glasgow living on £89 a week (Guardian 06/12/06) describing what poverty meant to her: *‘for me poverty means not being able to plan head for even small things like a birthday present for my daughter, and every utility bill bringing on a feeling of total helplessness. You wake up every morning wondering how you’re going to survive the week’.*

These exceptions aside, the dominant assumptions about people living in poverty in the UK are neatly summarised in an Opinion piece by Janet Daley (Telegraph, 29/08 2010). Calling for a fundamental rethink of how we assist ‘*the poor*’ and responding to the recently published report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) insinuating an unfair impact of the budget on those on lower incomes she commented,

*‘I realise that there are people whose life circumstances, through no or little fault of their own, have been so calamitous that they will require a great deal of help and charity (in the best sense of the word) to improve their condition. But that is all the more reason why dependence must not be treated as a lifestyle choice worthy of “protection”; the genuine hard cases need to be identified and dealt with as a matter of urgency, not simply absorbed into a more general undifferentiated underclass, where their severe social dysfunction will be exacerbated and will help to contribute to a wider malaise. (Robust, self-respecting working-class communities used to be able to deal with the odd delinquent youth or disruptive adult in a way that depressed underclass neighbourhoods cannot)’ (Emphasis added)*

The conflation in the Daley article above between unemployment, dependence, lifestyle choice, the underclass and dysfunction was echoed in much of the right-wing press across the time analysed. In the week of the 03-08 September 2009, the case of two brothers aged 10 and 12 attacking a nine and 11 year old in Edlington, Doncaster, dominated the media with hoards of front page news stories, features, letters and analysis pieces appearing. The focus was primarily on the horror of the crimes meted out by children so young to other children, the inadequacies of social services provision and the failings to remove children from the home situation at an early age. Debates raged between whether or not the children were culpable of their misdemeanours and what an appropriate penalty should be for their crimes. The debate was further fuelled by Martin Nary’s (Head of Barnardo’s) widely cited suggestion that babies born to ‘*useless parents*’ be ‘*removed at birth*’. The Mirror ran a feature (08/09/09) critiquing the concept of ‘*dysfunctional*’ and instead pointing to inadequacies in social services provision, funding, training and support for social care providers.

Despite the close focus on the boys’ ‘*dysfunctional*’ family, the debate however quickly started to insinuate the links between attributes of their family and wider social problems. Such depravity and dysfunction evidenced in the case drew us, via an apparently faultless connection, to those in receipt of welfare and particularly single parents. A piece by Melanie Philips in her column (Daily Mail 07/09/09) typified this response. She spoke of the fact that the boys through their upbringing had been denied the opportunity to develop into ‘*normally functioning human beings*’. Their mother, she wrote, had ‘*seven sons by three fathers is an alcoholic and a drug addict who left them to forage from rubbish bins and fed them cannabis to keep them quiet*’. She went on, ‘*the fact remains that family disintegration sets up chronic disadvantages for a child. Where these are not addressed, a cycle of deprivation is often transmitted down through the kids which replaces civilised behaviour by sheer savagery*’. And the connection between the crime and such ‘*savagery*’? According to Philips, it is in fact welfare and family policy, particularly under the Labour government, which undermined the ‘*traditional family*’. ‘*Far from alleviating poverty, distress and misery, these self-regarding ‘progressives’ instead created and perpetuated these ills; they incentivised family breakdown by handing out welfare benefits with no conditions attached. ...the birth of every child has been an effective engine of mass fatherlessness!*’ Hence from a violent attack by children,

unmarried mothers (yet again) become the real butt of the moral debate. Philips concluded in her piece that *'a more humane response to unmarried motherhood is to treat it for what it is – a potential disaster for both mother and baby'* and that *'turning off the benefits spigot ... would remove financial incentives that have made such disaster common place'*. Her final coup was that while *'well-heeled intelligentsia'* set out to make unmarried motherhood *'normal'*, they in fact were financially *'cushioned against the worst damage that the removal of such constraints on behaviour inflicted on the poor'*.

### **Migration, welfare and poverty**

A recurrent hostility emerged across the media in response to non British citizens arriving in the UK. Either they were European citizens *'taking advantage'* of health and welfare systems; or they were *'illegal immigrants'* or *'asylum seekers'* (the distinction ignored), with no *'right'* to be in the UK, yet allegedly offered better accommodation, benefits and health care than British citizens. Yet migration was also employed as a tool to further slate UK citizens receiving benefits who were *'too lazy to work'*.

In the week of November 2007, the matter of Eastern Europeans allegedly being able to access welfare benefits caused uproar in the media. The Sun (opinion page) summed up public opinion via one reader, Kelvin Mackenzie, who claimed to be in favour of the *'invasion of East Europeans of our country'*, willing to do jobs that Brits refused to do. However he declared his disapproval of people *'looking for a better life by coming here then taking advantage of our welfare system'*. The welcoming atmosphere, he warned, would quickly change if *'they appear to be scroungers. We don't want foreign bludgers, we have enough of our own'*. The Daily Mail claimed that after just a year of living in the UK, migrant workers, *'arriving at the rate of 700 a day'* are entitled to the same level of support as any British citizen.

In Ireland too, xenophobia grew in response to the arrival of increasing numbers of refugees who were said to receive better treatment, including free accommodation, healthcare, childcare and food than the rest of the population. For the rest, claimed Pat Flanagan in The Mirror (02/05/08), *'kids are being packed into rat-infested schools and old people are dying on trolleys while waiting for beds in our filthy, understaffed hospitals'*.

Equally in Scotland, the number of racist incidents rose by a fifth in the preceding year according to the Scottish edition of The Express (11/02/11). The report written by the Centre of Human Ecology, drew a link between the economy and rising racism, *'wherever you have the fear of poverty, people tend to become xenophobic'*, said one of the researchers. The Sun produced the stereostory under the headline *'£170k benefit bill is barmy'* (12/10/08) and citing a single mother Afghan *'migrant'* with seven children, allegedly receiving £170k a year in benefits and living in a *'£1.2 million mansion'* – *'an obscenity when so many of our own people are living in poverty. We are the softest and most stupid of nations and no wonder so many migrants flock to our shores'*.

By 2009, the *'easy access to benefits'* slogan and the weak immigration and asylum policy became the axes to grind of the right-wing media. Letters in The Sun (22/04/09) newspaper supported the assertion of Natacha Bouchart, Mayor of Calais, that the numbers of asylum seekers in the French port were a direct result of an over generous welfare system in the UK. A view picked up also in the Daily Star on the same day. Leo McKinstry's leader column in The Express claimed that *'the absurd extravagance of our welfare system and the laxity of our borders'* were to blame for *'illegal immigration'*. He then pulled up a further stereostory in the shape of an Iraqi Kurdish family who, soon after their arrival, were allegedly given a house in Birmingham and over £170 a week in benefits, *'more than most pensioners receive'*. He criticised the government further for creating a *'vast public-funded industry to*

*protect the rights of migrants*'. In direct response to McKinstry's article, one reader – a J. Griffiths from Pontypool, claimed that he would never buy another lottery ticket after it was revealed that £75 million of funding had been given to charities supporting asylum seekers, stating *'I am absolutely appalled that a whole industry has been created to protect the rights of migrants'*.

Later in 2009 saw a significant rise in support for the British National Party (BNP), attributed by the Daily Telegraph (Features, 07/09/09) to Labour's inadequate policies on immigration and welfare reform. The Independent (08/09/09), however, ascribed the rise in support to the BNP more to the panic instilled by organisations such as MigrationWatch UK. In August 2010 there was further debate in the media over the Conservatives' inability to cap immigration despite their electoral promises. Dominic Lawson writing in the Editorial Opinion in the Sunday Times (29/08/10) commented, *'it is certainly lamentable that while millions of Britons vegetate on out-of-work benefits, jobs that they should be fit for are taken in their hundreds of thousands by migrants'*. The modern welfare state, he argues, though started with the best of intentions has *'developed into a machine for the discouragement of employment'* and hence immigration will never be controlled unless *'we get people back to work'*. Steve Doughty, Social Affairs correspondent in the Daily Mail (23/08/10) claimed that it was the *'poorest voters'*, and *'the working classes'* who, in a Demos poll, demonstrated the greatest fears about immigration and its inherent risk to *'British Identity'*.

In February 2011 attention turned once again to what was termed in the Daily Star (14/02/11) the *'Migrant Scam'* – a widely reported assertion that up to 155,000 *'illegal migrant workers'* were eligible to claim benefits including employment and support allowance (ESA), maternity/paternity pay and sick pay due to a *'loophole in the welfare system'*; *'Benefit Madness'* (Daily Mail comments, 14/02/11) was attributed to the *'crazy'* immigration and welfare systems under labour. The Political Editor of the Daily Mail on the same day vindicated the proposed Welfare Reform Bill as a means to redress such loopholes.

Political rhetoric provided by David Cameron's speech on terrorism in Munich the same week, in which he claimed that multiculturalism was a failed experiment, added fuel to one reader in the Express (08/02/11) who claimed that *'we should now tell the existing immigrants that their welfare benefits and housing will stop after a year unless they become fluent in English'*

### **Hijacking of the welfare state?**

The degree of mistrust of those in receipt of welfare payments emerges sporadically throughout the period of media analysis. The week of 17-23 November 2007 saw the first revelations concerning new Work Capability Assessments to be introduced in October 2008. While some media coverage highlighted or acknowledge a degree of complicity by the Labour government in purposefully channelling people through incapacity benefit provisions so that they were not included in unemployment figures, such views were sharply juxtaposed against the fact that, despite an alleged *'booming economy'* there had evolved what has been dubbed a *'sick note culture'* in Britain. An opinion piece in The Express (02/11/11) called *'Disgrace of the shirkers'* claimed, *'the welfare state has been hijacked by people too idle to do a proper day's work'* and that it was time to *'crackdown on those who 'sponge off tax payers'*. The political response from ministers was that they were launching *'a benefits crackdown'*.

Organisations such as the Disability Alliance expressed *'grave reservations'* about the reliability and fairness of the new work capability tests and criticised government for *'castigating individual claimants'* (Guardian, 22/11/07). They highlighted the widespread fear amongst people with physical and mental health disabilities and expressed concerns for the

reliability of the tests and the competencies of those administering them. These views contrasted sharply with other political and public opinions. Letters in the Sun (22/11/07) for example under the strapline *'fit as a fiddler'*, heralded the tests as an *'excellent idea'*, with one reader stating, *'I am sickened at the amount of malingerers abusing our incapacity benefits system'*; while another, *'at last the sick note scroungers are to get a kick up the butt'*. The suggested approach by government to provide as much help as possible to enable people to return to work was met by a leading feature article in the Daily Telegraph (20/11/07) as *'all carrot and no stick'*. A report emerged that some 2,000 claims had been made by people *'too fat to work'* (The Times, 20/11/07) while the Daily Mail's Kirsty Walker's piece on *'spot the malingerer'* – derided the welfare system for providing *'millions of pounds to those too fat, tired or spotty to work'*. The main section of the Daily Mail (17/11/07) had a full piece entitled *'Make life tough for the idle'*, praising David Cameron's alleged plans to introduce a Wisconsin-style, sub-contracted, payment by results system for managing welfare in the UK.

The emphasis on benefit *'fraud'* was typified by New Labour's introduction of lie detectors reported in the Morning Star (08/05/08) and described as an *'appalling attack on Britain's poorest people'*. 'Anti-fraud minister, James Plaskitt, announced the extension of a pilot scheme at seven local councils. The detectors use voice risk analysis to determine whether benefit claimants were lying about their personal circumstances. Disability rights and welfare organisations slammed the *'unproven'* technology as stigmatising, potentially putting off those with legitimate claims from accessing what they were entitled to.

The same themes reappeared across the media a couple of years later in the week 03-09 September 2009. The Express wheeled out its latest *'stereostory'* in the shape of two siblings, one sister who worked 50 hours a week and her brother who was *'living off the recycled tax contributions of his sister'*. The article claimed that the brother had benefitted from Labour's campaign against child poverty. Letters in the response to the article came in from incensed readers; *'dole scroungers are regarded as the new middle class while the rest of us who struggle working to support them become new poverty-stricken social underclass'* (09/09/09); and *'rotten welfare state in dire need of reform'* (08/09/09).

The same issues emerge yet again in 2010 when the subject of *'benefits cheat'* and the naming and shaming of certain individuals typifying the fraudulence of those on benefits. In August, The Express (25/08/10) cited Cheryl Laughton from Newcastle allegedly defrauding £200,000 worth of *'tax payers' money'*, yet only receiving a two-week suspended prison sentence because she was three months pregnant. In the same week an editorial piece in the Express (23/08/10) branded Wendy Lewis *'a repulsive slob'* for getting drunk and urinating on the cenotaph in Blackpool. This act of indecency soon translated into what the author recognised as the real underlying *'problems'* – the fact that Wendy Lewis was receiving benefits and was a single mother paved a tirade of other concerns of the columnist; *'endlessly binge drinking and breeding without ever facing up to the consequences'*, she was in fact representative of *'a culture of instant gratification'*, and proof that, *'the welfare system encourages wastrels like Wendy Lewis'*.

In August 2010 The Daily Star (25/08) picked up the alleged story that fraud and mistakes had cost tax payers £1 billion in overpayment of disability benefits: *'we don't pay our taxes only to get ripped off by disability claimants'*, Richard Peppiatt asserted, ending his piece with the launch of a telephone poll: *'Should all benefit cheats be jailed?'* The inevitable stereostory entailed Terrence Read seen *'jiving energetically'*, after receiving £20,000 in disability allowances. Fast forward to February 2011 and the same issues are front page news across all the papers. This time the furore caused by a report allegedly showing that two thirds of people currently claiming disability living allowance or employment and support allowance were in fact able to work or could return to work with minimum training and support. The employment minister Chris Grayling claimed this as proof of the need to

reassess incapacity benefit claimants and declared the welfare state '*no longer fit for purpose*'. This led to a barrage of response in the right-wing press. '*Britain's bloated benefits culture*' (The Daily Telegraph (News) 02/02/11); '*1.8 million on sickness benefits are perfectly fit to work*' (claimed Emma Boon in Daily Mail, 11/02/11) who went on, '*some 7,100 tried to claim because they had sexually transmitted diseases and nearly 10,000 because they were too fat*'. Sarah O'Grady in The Express news column (14/02/11) went further to claim that millions of emergency welfare funds were '*squandered on holidays and nights out*' and called for an end to '*hole in the wall benefit loans*'.

The dominant discourses reflected across the news coverage were reiterated via public opinion through letters: '*I think workshy families with lots of kids should live in pairs of high-rise flats that have been knocked through. These flats are not popular with council tenants, so this would be a way of using them up and leaving the houses for hard-working families*'. (Mick Smith, Stourbridge; The Sun; 25/08/10) and from Joan Bowe of Barnet, '*Welfare benefits should only be paid to people who have worked in the UK for at least five years*'.

The counter, though muffled, argument to the 'millions' lost through fraudulent welfare claims is the far more substantial amounts lost in revenue through the tax avoidance of large corporations and wealthy individuals. A report by ActionAid (May 2008) criticised the multinational companies sitting with Gordon Brown to discuss the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on the grounds that if a sample of 14 big companies involved paid the full amount of corporation tax they owed, the USA and GB would have had a further 16 billion in tax revenue (The Guardian, Financial pages, 06/05/08). John Hillary, executive director of War on Want, described the meeting as a '*cynical public relations exercise*' allowing companies '*to portray themselves as allies in the fight against poverty*'. The Morning Star (15/10/08) cited '*a dangerous path of market liberalisation and deregulation has exposed millions to unemployment and long-term poverty*' along with the government's '*failure to crack down on corporate abuses*'; a letter in the Times (28/08/10) purporting that such abuses cost '*40 times as much*' than any fraudulent use of welfare services.

### **Government policies alleviating/ exacerbating poverty**

On the one hand, while people on low incomes, especially those not working, bear the brunt of criticism across the media about their lack of moral fibre, on the other they are used repeatedly in rhetorical political debates about how they should best be '*helped*', cajoled or '*forced*' out of poverty and what the role of welfare policy should be.

#### *Brown and the 10p tax rate*

At the end of April, 2008 Labour fared poorly in the local elections and Brown faced widespread criticism, including from previously loyal backbenchers, over what was perceived as a rash abolition of the 10p tax rate (the starter rate for taxation). Those within the Labour party further to the left of Brown, such as Jon Cruddas, made reference to the very 'human' side of David Cameron, citing him as having more emotional literacy than Gordon Brown, and calling on Brown to '*get in touch with his softer side*' (Daily Telegraph, 08/05/08). During the same week, a piece in the Guardian Home pages (Patrick Wintour and Severin Carrell 07/05/08) highlighted that Brown faced threats to his leadership on three fronts; the call for Scottish independence, the 42 days detention and the 10p tax climb down (ie reversing its introduction in the 2007 budget). In a further setback for the prime minister, a poll carried out by Times Populus showed that a majority of Labour supporters felt the party would be better off if Brown stood down, making way for a younger leader.

James Purnell (work and pensions secretary) called for the Labour party to unite behind Brown in the fight against poverty, which binds, he said, old and new labour and draws the clear distinction between Labour and the conservatives '*The Tories don't want to eradicate*



*poverty, they want to redefine it*, he said in a speech to the Fabian Society. The same story was picked up in several papers in which ‘poverty’ was presented as the trump that could still turn things round for the waning Labour party, mainly because the Tories allegedly had no clear policy to eradicate it.

Jeremy Corbyn in the Morning Star (07/05/08) highlighted Brown’s urgency to talk about eliminating poverty but not about redistribution. Brown claimed that tax credits would mitigate the loss of the 10p tax rate, yet evidence was emerging that the abolishment was in fact penalising the lowest paid, many of whom were not eligible for tax credits, and that the divide between rich and poor was rapidly growing. *‘The new tax system is blatantly unfair towards the very poorest people in work’*. Frank Field, writing in the Mail on Sunday, (04/05/08) spoke of how Brown refused to listen to those opposing the abolition of the 10p tax rate and about the irony of a government *‘which has done more than any other Government to tackle poverty proposing a measure to cut the living standards of those who earn the least’*.

Six months later Frank Field wrote again, this time in the Daily Telegraph (16/10/08), about what he saw as the failure of Labour’s welfare reforms to reduce the total number of people without work. He claimed that after a total expenditure of 77 billion on welfare reform that the number of working age claiming out of work benefits had fallen by just 500,000. The dual pronged approach of tax credits and the new deal programme (helping and hassling claimants into work) had not succeeded in *‘inducing a mass exodus from the welfare rolls’*. He called on government to prevent further rises in unemployment and warned of the *‘record welfare budget’* imploding under the weight of new claimants and rapidly rising prices.

#### *The ‘attack’ on the middle classes and the 50p tax*

In the spring of 2009 the week in the news (22-28 April) saw most attention focused on the revelation of the extent of government borrowing and the state of the economy, following an IMF report. Equal attention was given to Alistair Darling’s budget and in particular it’s perceived attack on the *‘middle classes’* through the 50p tax tariff (calculated by some to translate into 61pence in every pound in real terms). Jason Groves, Political Editor in the Sunday Express (26/04/09) described it as the most *‘shamelessly political move’*, while Simon Heffer offered a features piece in the Daily Telegraph (23/04/) in which he described the budget as a *‘pointless attack on middle England’* while reflecting on the budget’s *‘idiocy, bigotry, tribalism and sheer class hatred’* and tagging it a *‘budget for poverty’*. Heffer described those in receipt of benefits as *‘clientele’*, and postured how Labour had kept this *‘clientele in a style to which it is now accustomed’*, sharply contrasting them with *‘those tens of millions of Britons, who work hard, save hard, take responsibility for themselves and make no claim on the state’*.

The Daily Telegraph Money Section (25/04/09) slammed Alistair Darling for failing to address the needs of pensioner poverty, while a letter in the Guardian (24/04) declared the budget’s moral failure to address child poverty. The Morning Star reported the view of Andrew Fisher (coordinator of the Left Economics Panel) that the budget lacked any passion in arguing for the issues at the heart of Labour’s manifesto when they came to power, to reduce inequality and child poverty, which now, he said, *‘lay abandoned’*. He warned that whoever won the next election would attack public services, welfare and public sector pensions stating that *‘it will be up to the left to not only unite against the next government’s divisive scapegoating of the unemployed, immigrants, public sector workers and trade unions but to force solution’*. To commentators on the Right, the announcement of the 50p ‘penal tax rate’ represented, according to Boris Johnson writing in The Telegraph, *‘a flagrant breach’* of Labour’s election manifesto; while Julia Hartley-Brewer in the Sunday Express declared it a *‘cynical tax on a wealth of hard workers’*, the alternative she suggested was *‘to rein in spending on our bloated public sector’*. The extent of public borrowing (*‘a seismic deficit that will take years to mend*, according to Jonathon Oliver and David Smith in the

Times), social welfare spending accounting for an estimated 12% of GDP combined with the 50p tax rate prompted Liam Halligan in the Sunday Telegraph (26/04/09) to declare that *'Only Tory daring can drag Britain back from the Brink'*. Polly Toynbee in the Guardian (25/05/09) questioned the two *'prevailing truths'* dominating the media that a) borrowing is wildly out of control and b) that the *'only remedy is leeching public services and shrinking the state'*, while the option of imposing higher taxes was being circumnavigated.

### *The 'poorest' hit by Coalition budget*

The week of the 23-29 August 2010 was dominated by the Institute for Fiscal Studies' (IFS) analysis of the coalition government's budget, seeking to make £11 billion in welfare savings. Across the political spectrum there was uproar at the headline news that the 'poorest' in society would be hit hardest by the austerity measures included in the budget, with those on lower incomes seeing incomes fall by 5.2% compared to the richest who would see a reduction in income of just 1.1%. However, there was also a clear split between those supporting the position of the government's *'rolling back the state'* and those who felt that such measures were draconian and unjust. The Fawcett Society launched a litigation against the Coalition for failing to consider sufficiently the impact of its measures in accordance with Equality and Diversity legislation – in particular the impact of the cuts on women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. Essentially the debate centred on whether in fact the budget was *'progressive'*, as claimed by the Coalition government, or conversely *'regressive'*, as defined by the IFS report and the left-leaning cohort of the press. Will Stone in the Morning Star heralded what he described as a *'class war on Britain's poorest'*, and James Lyons in the Mirror (25/08/10) deemed it a *'shocking attack on children, hitting poor families hardest'*.

Paul Vallely writing in the Independent (29/08/10) and responding to the Tory party's mantra of *'progressive conservatism'* alongside the IFS report of the impact of the recent budget on people in poverty, responded with *'there's nothing progressive about poverty: The jargon of political theory cannot disguise the deeply divisive policies that advance the rich at the expense of the poor'*. Indeed, he claimed *'progressive conservatism was something of an oxymoron'*. He purported that in order to be *'progressive'*, the budget would require significant increases in taxes on the rich, a move rejected by the Tories. Instead, he said, they intended to *'take a scythe through the public sector'*, a move which would *'devastate the poorest people in the poorest parts of the nation'*. *'The big losers from the budget'*, stated Larry Elliot in the Guardian, *'will be poor working families with children and those dependent on state benefits, the same people in other words, who lost out in the Thatcher budgets of the 1980s'* (Comment and debate pages, 26/08/10).

The Coalition government for their part defended the cuts, claiming that the IFS analysis was partial and biased and had not incorporated the potential benefits of new measures such as the pupil premium (a direct payment to schools for every child living in poverty to support their education) and the cuts to corporation tax, said to stimulate the economy and create jobs. Danny Alexander (Liberal Democrat chief secretary to the Treasury) interviewed in The Observer (29/08/10) stated that making tough economic choices did not mean that he had *'lost his way as a Liberal Democrat'*, that he had not been taken 'Tory prisoner' and that *'fairness and social mobility have been at the centre of all discussions and will continue to be so'*. The most prominent political faux pas was made by treasury minister Mark Hoban, who defended the cuts in housing benefit saying that people could *'simply'* move to cheaper accommodation.

References from the right-leaning press were repeatedly made to the notion of *'welfare dependency'* *'hand out trap'*, *'welfare serfdom'*, *'welfarism'*. Neil Hamilton in the Sunday Express (29/08/10) accused the End Child Poverty *'leftist campaign group'* of commissioning the IFS to make the budget look unfair when *'the trouble is that too many of them should be*

*working yet choose not to*. Typically, stereostories provided the fodder to defend such claims for example, 'The Chawner family' from Blackburn who are *'too fat to work'* (Sunday Express, 29 August 2010). Around the same time, Iain Duncan Smith established the Centre for Social Justice in an attempt to *'end the culture of welfare dependency'* (Simon Walters, Political Editor, Mail on Sunday, 29/08/10). His proposed plans for Universal Credit were however slammed as *'impractical and unworkable'* by Claire Lombardelli, the treasury official in charge of welfare- a statement which led to Iain Duncan Smith threatening to resign and requiring the intervention of David Cameron to mitigate the argument.

And wider references were made to the structural dangers of a welfare state which had become *'so huge, incomprehensible, costly and inefficient that Britain's in danger of becoming a farewell state'* (Sunday Express, 29 August, 2010). A similar piece in the Daily Mail (26/08/10) charged Labour policies with creating *'a vast new class of state-dependent families, desperately vulnerable to spending cuts...For them the worst cruelty has been that the system has locked them into poverty, draining incentives to work, or to move up the pay scale'*. It went on, *'greater incentives to work will convert the **drones** into workers'*. The paper used an image from the 'Shameless' TV drama to represent the *'dysfunctional family of benefit scroungers'*. Such assertions offer fodder to the right in support of the welfare reform bill, and a chance to counter *'intergenerational worklessness and benefit dependency on a massive scale'*, the *'broken welfare system'* having *'reinforced this destructive cycle for generations'* (Daily Mail Political Editor, 14/02/11).

Philip Blond (director of the think tank Respublica) claimed in the comments section of The Observer (29/08/10) that *'we won't help the poor by increasing benefits: George Osborne isn't picking on the poor, but he needs to offer them a route to prosperity'*. He went on, *'Too many on the left have not grasped that welfarism and the concentration of wealth go hand in hand. If people are denied ownership and access to markets in exchange for welfare serfdom then over time you create a supplicant class that can never escape'*. A similar view was shared by Neil O'Brien in the opinion column of The Daily Telegraph (27/08/10); *'the coalition's reforms are far better for the poor than Gordon Brown's handouts'*. Rather, he said, Iain Duncan Smith's plans along with Michael Gove's educational reforms will do more for *'equality of opportunity'*.

Suggested measures of raising taxes for the highest earners continued as a bone of contention between left and right; the left considering tax increases as the fairest way to redress inequalities and balance the ledgers, the right shrugging such moves off with the assertion that higher earners *'will just move elsewhere'*. Ed Miliband (shadow Minister for Energy and the Environment) writing in the Observer (29/08/10) argued the promotion of a 'living wage' rather than the minimum wage on the basis that employers were currently pushing the costs of low wages onto the tax payer. Equally highlighted was the unfairness of bankers being paid 200 times the wage of their cleaners and the need to increase taxes on banks.

The Times letters of the same week (28/08/10) reflected generally unsympathetic views of *'the poor'*: one reader said they were only the *'hardest hit'* by the cuts because they are more *'reliant on government aid'*; another that we *'must encourage individuals and families to be self supportive, there is no free lunch in an economy such as Britain where deficits have climbed out of control'*; and another commented, *'so what if the poor are hit the hardest? They produce the least wealth and cost the country the most. The vast majority of 'the poor' are poor through their own doing'*. A sole voice of one reader reflected how the focus on *'benefit fraud'* was simply a ruse to detract from the fact that tax evasion by the rich cost the country 40 times as much as mismanagement or misuse of welfare benefits.

### *Impact of the cuts*

Government policy as the cause or aggravation of poverty and inequality was a further recurrent theme. In the week 08-14 February 2011, the focus of the media was largely on the scale and impact of local authority cuts as they began to take effect. A letter in The Times in Northern Ireland (13/02/11) likened the scale and speed of cuts imposed by the Coalition government as being akin to *'an individual coming off alcohol, cigarettes and drugs at the same time'*. It cautioned against a new class, *the nouveau pauvre* emerging as a result of the *'economic cold turkey'*. In England, The Times features section (11/02/11) had Frank Field (the Prime Minister's poverty adviser) warning that local government spending cuts would *'scupper the life chances'* of poor children through the decimation of Sure Start Centres.

Equally the unfairness of the cuts became a theme which was echoed across the media; the wages of bureaucrats protected while local libraries and swimming pools were closed with little accountability from town halls (The Mail, 14/02/11); the impact of cuts to the disability living allowance on the mental health of people fearing that their allowances would be stopped (The Guardian, 14/02/11); The small levy on bank profits coupled with the cuts in corporation tax juxtaposed against the £18 billion cuts in welfare over the next four years (The Morning Star, 12/02/11). The fact that the cuts were proving to be most severe in labour councils such as Liverpool, Manchester and Blackburn compared to traditionally Conservative councils (Polly Toynbee in The Guardian, 12/02/11); The disproportionate impact of the cuts on children, youth and leisure services, social care and older people (The Guardian, 12/02/11).

### *The Big Society*

Debates around the 'Big Society', its meaning, purpose and political significance come much to the fore early in 2011. The notion of encouraging *'people to take more responsibility for their own lives'* (Melanie Phillips in the Daily Mail, 14/02/11) was a noble idea and a means of ending the *'over-mighty state'*. The *'magnificent civil society'*, had been swept away by the welfare state, which had sapped *'both altruism and personal responsibility'* and replaced them with a *'culture of rights and entitlements'*. Yet despite the laudability of the notion of the Big Society, she said, it could not materialise unless the welfare state was dismantled and Mr Cameron started to defend *'the key cultural bonds of faith, family and the flat'*. A more sceptical piece in the paper on the same day was written by Peter McKay, describing the Big Society as *'just spin with nobs on'*, to be used as a means to preserve the status quo, sustaining inequality and bankers bonuses. It was, he said, not Big Society but *'elite society'* - citing a recent auction of city bank internships to wealthy conservative-supporting parents who combined to raise £14,000 for Tory funds. David Cameron, himself defended his vision of the Big Society in the Observer the same week, calling on people to *'ignore the sceptics'*, that it was not a cover for cuts and that he had been talking about *'social responsibility'* long before cuts. The Big Society, he said, *'is about changing the way our country is run...Let's treat adults like adults and give them more responsibility over their lives'*.

Fiona Phillips in the Mirror (12/02/11) wrote a piece - *'Big Society My Arse'* – in which she accused the *'Eton Boys'* of being oblivious to what it feels like to experience debt or homelessness and slammed their indifference to its impact on people's lives. The Guardian leader pages tagged the Big Society as an abstraction and unworkable since the scale of cuts had made it impossible for the voluntary sector to assume the role of the state as was envisaged. Dame Elisabeth Hoodless (dubbed 'the mother of the Big Society'), among others such as Tessa Jowell, pointed out that the *army of volunteers'* supposed to take on the functions of the Big Society, was *'being destroyed'*.

### *The reform of welfare and society*

In October, 2008, the Morning Star critiqued government proposals to introduce an American-style workfare strategy. The paper accused Work and Pensions Secretary, James Purnell of plummeting to *'a new low in Labour history'* by opting for the *'obnoxious US workfare system to attack the unemployed'*. He went on, *'forcing jobless people to work for their benefits undermines the principles of the welfare state and demeans the unemployed themselves rather than the system that can't produce enough jobs'*. In 2010 the workfare debates were also evident in Ireland where the Sunday Times (29/08/10) reported on the new government plans to *'put thousands to work in their communities and cut payments to those who refuse'* under the banner of *'social employment'*. Louise Gray in the Daily Telegraph (26/08/10) called for greater flexibility within the welfare system to allow *'British Citizens'* (as opposed to migrant workers) to pick fruit. The Express Business Section (26/08/10) highlighted how subcontracts for welfare reform and welfare to work programmes had benefitted organisations such as SERCO who had reported 22% in pre-tax profits for the previous year.

By January 2012, Iain Duncan Smith's Welfare Reform Bill was winding its way to the House of Lords amidst a furore of political debate. In the same week David Cameron announced a £200 million scheme administered by the Department of Work and Pensions (and an extension of the welfare to work programme) to employ private firms to 'fix' troubled families. The scheme, reported widely in the media, would work on a payment by results basis for every family signed up to a scheme to facilitate them finding work. The scheme would address *'a culture of disruption and irresponsibility'* focusing on multiple problem families who *'cost the tax payers billions of pounds a year through drug addiction, alcohol abuse and crime'* (Tim Ross and Graeme Paton in the Telegraph, 03/02/12). The Daily Mail (03/01/12) describe the programme as a means of turning around *'shameless'* families.

#### *The way forward for the Labour opposition*

In January 2012 the media was full of speculation about the fortunes of the Labour party and the sorts of policy initiatives they would need to adopt in order to return to power. Once again recipients of welfare and the future of the welfare state became the focus of much debate. Patrick O'Flynn kicked off the debate (The Express 01/01/ 2012) with the suggestion that Miliband should *'abandon Labour's child poverty strategy which is based on chucking money at non working parents...cash benefits to the number of offspring an adult can produce has lead some of the worst adults to have the most children while infuriating their hardworking and responsible neighbours. Unless Labour pledges to stop the booze and drugs money of the underclass...it will not cut through the fog'*. Polly Toynbee in the Guardian (01/01/12) accused Liam Byrne (Shadow Work and Pensions secretary) of missing the chance to trash the Welfare Reform Bill on its return to the Lords, following a further IFS analysis highlighting the fact that children would be hit hardest by the Bill. Instead, she said, Labour were buying into welfare fallacies and were concerned more about their image of appearing *'too soft'* on welfare to contest the reforms.

Byrne, for his part, wrote an article in the Guardian in anticipation of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beveridge report. The article was interpreted by Peter Osborne in the Telegraph (05/01/12) as *'a very brave admission; something has gone horribly wrong with William Beveridge's brainchild, which is in need of urgent surgery'*. Osborne took this as an acknowledgement by Byrne that Iain Duncan Smith's radical welfare reforms were *'fully justified'* and that he had come to accept that *'welfare payments can trap people in poverty'*. Simon Walter, political editor in the Mail on Sunday (01/01/12) went further in his piece anticipating Liam Byrne's report called, *'Now Ed gets tough with onslaught against 'Evil' of benefit scroungers who refuse to work'*. This he said was in an effort to shrug off the Labour Party's *'soft on spongers'* image. Zoe Williams in the Guardian (05/01/12) recently spoke of

how the last Labour government focused on child poverty because they were '*politically neutral*' and that it was hard to question the importance of children's welfare. Yet, she argued, it was now time to acknowledge that the cuts were hitting the poorest hardest and the debate needed to focus squarely on the question of inequalities as they affected adults.

## Conclusions

In the UK there is an extricable link drawn in public and political discourse between poverty, not working and being in receipt of welfare benefits. This link sets the scene for most lay and governmental debates around poverty and frames (as we show in our later work) the agenda for policies designed to alleviate poverty in the UK.

The notions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' are profoundly entrenched in the political and media debates. Certain groups of people (such as older people or children) and certain circumstances generate a degree of collective sympathy which is amplified across the media and used to support or broadcast the injustices faced by the 'deserving' poor. However, the majority of people facing hardship are deemed 'undeserving' by the majority of media outlets, their cause being taken up by a minority of newspapers, tending to sit to the left of the political spectrum and which have relatively small readership and coverage.

The publications most uncompromisingly critical of people living in poverty, and especially of those in receipt of welfare benefits are the tabloids that sit right of centre of the political spectrum, in particular The Daily Mail, The Sun, The Daily Star and The Daily Express. As can be seen from Table 1, The Daily Mail and The Sun have a circulation that far exceeds any of the more left of centre publications such as the Daily Mirror or the Guardian. Hence, the constructed stereotype in these former publications of '*the work shy*', '*the benefit bum*', the '*scrounger*', are widely absorbed as representative of people living in poverty in the UK. What we have dubbed stereostories are repeatedly employed by certain newspapers to depict lifestyles of people in poverty which are immoral, depraved, irresponsible and indolent. These are presented not just as illustrations of 'types of people' but as the archetype, usually epitomising the antithesis of the political, social or moral position assumed by the publication. The ideas generated by these stories not only fuel public debate but permeate political discourse – hence the stereotype becomes the target of the political response and feeds the rhetorical debates that ensue between Left and Right-wing politicians.

The analysis reveals that the class debate is as strong today as it has ever been. When felt under threat, the 'middle classes' (or those media that represent them) are as likely to hide behind the label as they are to point fingers at the 'working', or more derisory 'under' classes. The rubrics of 'fairness', 'justice', 'social mobility' and 'equality' with respect to poverty hold fundamentally different meanings for distinct political positions.

The media works in complex ways to instigate and perpetuate social divisions between groups of people; the working and the not working; the benefit recipient and the 'taxpayer'; the immigrant and the citizen; the single mother and the married couple; the younger '*thug*' and the older pensioner; the middle class and the working class. The list is endless but is further proof of the process of othering that we have talked about in earlier work. It goes without saying that 'shame' is employed incessantly across the media to label, stigmatise, criticise, deride and penalise people living in poverty in the UK. The same shaming is used as a political tool and is implicit in the majority of policies highlighted in this report.