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'Reframing the Poverty Debate' the New Labour Way

Gerry Mooney

New Labour and the Politics of Aspiration

Speaking at a one-day conference of the Social Market Foundation in London on April 30, 2007, Jim Murphy, New Labour MP for East Renfrewshire and Minister of State in the Department for Work and Pensions talked of the need to 'reframe the poverty debate'.¹ In this speech and in a related pamphlet and newspaper article² Murphy strives to forge a distinction between what he terms 'conservation' on the one hand and 'aspiration' on the other. Aspiration, he claims, is the key to forging a new era of social progress and political change. Further public services 'reform', the promotion of 'choice' and developing 'personalised' services are all pinpointed as key elements in this process. For Murphy this politics of aspiration is key to developing New Labour's approach to poverty which, to use his terms, must replace 'the politics of charity' which he sees as dominating the discussion of poverty in the UK today.

We will return to Murphy's arguments a little later but it is highlighted here to draw attention to some of the ways in which the question of poverty is being reconstructed by New Labour and an assortment of journalists, academics and social and political commentators today. Without wishing to give this reconstruction a sense of coherence and organisation that it hardly merits, nonetheless it is increasingly evident that poverty is back on the agenda, but back on it in particular and very worrying ways. Of course at one level poverty has, with the exception of the period of Tory government during the 1980s and 1990s, rarely been removed from the political agenda – even if this is overtaken under New Labour with an emphasis on 'social exclusion'. In addition, arguably there is little that is new in this the latest 'rediscovery' of, and rethinking around, poverty. 'Poverty' is one of those issues that is always present, even if it often takes the form of an 'absent presence', that is an existing reality but one that does not always merit the attention it deserves. Despite repeated efforts by some anti-poverty campaigners, activists and academics,³ the question of poverty did not feature prominently in the recent Scottish Elections for example, largely sidelined along with many other important social and economic issues by the overwhelming and at times stifling debate on the question of 'the constitution'.

Poverty has long been an 'essentially contested' notion provoking numerous debates, arguments, controversies over definition, measurement and meaning as well as around the policy responses to it. Running through all of these debates one maxim tends to stand out: how poverty is defined, understood and talked about says much about the shape and nature of any policy and political response to it. And there is mounting evidence, both at UK and at Scottish levels that there is a coming together of some very regressive ideas and arguments which are helping to 'reframe' the poverty debate today in ways that should concern all of us who are interested in pursuing a more socially just agenda in contemporary Scotland. By this I mean not the New Labour neo-liberal vision of social justice premised on a celebration of the market but an entirely different conception and understanding of social justice that argues for social and economic equality through an attack on wealth and vested interests.

'The Poor' as a 'Problem Population'

The assumption that many readers of *Variant* will surely share – that discussions of poverty and inequality should start from questions of social justice, of fairness and of compassion – is often far removed from the tone and approach that some academics, social commentators and politicians (and not always right-wing politicians at that) bring to the debate. Alongside campaigning groups from the poor, activists, trade unionists, academics and socialists have long had to battle the idea that the poor are a 'problem' population, a population that is in some way out of step with the 'mainstream' of UK society. Such sentiments have long featured in accounts and explanations of poverty and, arguably, since the 1980s in particular, there has been something of a shift in political attitudes to poverty, both across different countries and at a global level, which regards poor people in some way as deficient, as contributing to their own precarious situation. While the nature, extent and intensity of such views vary between place and over time, we do not have to look far to find claims that 'the poor' represent a 'danger' not only to themselves, but also to 'wider' society. In each period over the past century and a half, when poverty and inequality has increased, as since the late 1970s and early 1980s not only is poverty *rediscovered*, but this is accompanied by attempts to construct 'the problem' not as one of poverty but of poor people, their behaviours, lifestyles, cultures and inadequacies of a multitude of differing kinds. How the question of poverty is understood and how poor people are talked of and labelled says everything about the policies that will be developed in response. Seeing the poor and disadvantaged as 'at risk' or as 'vulnerable', requiring (more) state support stands in sharp contrast to viewing the poor as some kind of 'problem' group or 'underclass' that necessitates strict management.

It is important to be aware that the history of the study of poverty is characterised by the use of a language that has tended to describe 'the poor' often in the most condemning and derogatory of ways. From a concern with the 'dangerous' and 'disreputable' poor in the nineteenth century through to 'problem families', 'dysfunctional families/communities' and the 'underclass' and 'socially excluded' of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, poor people have all too frequently been talked *about* (and rarely talked *with*) in the most derogatory of ways.⁴ Labels such as 'underclass', 'hard to reach', 'welfare dependent' as well as some uses of the notion of 'the socially excluded' are stigmatising and mobilise normative ways of thinking of poverty and inequality that constructs 'the poor' and disadvantaged almost as a distinctive group of people living 'on' or 'beyond' the 'margins' of society. In the process this language works to distance 'them' from 'us', the 'mainstream' of society, 'normal', 'hard working', 'responsible' citizens.⁵ Such language has become a stock in trade for many New Labour and Conservative politicians today – and not a few academics and journalists also!

The Re-emergence of 'Culture'-Centred Explanations of Poverty

There are a number of different ways of thinking of poverty that rely on what we could generally term a culture-centred perspective, that is an account that starts from and revolves around the



individual and or which focus on the production and reproduction of particular cultural and behavioural norms and ways of living that work in some way to keep poor people in poverty. Among the most well known of such ways of thinking are explanations which focus on 'cultures of poverty' or 'cycles of deprivation'.⁶ Culture, in this context, is being used to refer to a system of values, norms and attitudes that are regarded as normal for a particular group. The culture of poverty thesis claims that a set of values are being passed through families and across generations that prevent poor people and poor families 'escaping' from poverty. This approach became influential among both politicians and policy-makers in the United States during the 1960s and early 1970s as a means of explaining the persistence of poverty among black Americans. But it is a discourse that has travelled far and wide, albeit with some modification. It was popularised in the UK as a 'cycle of deprivation' in the 1970s by the Conservative politician, Keith Joseph, who argued that the persistence of poverty in the context of general economic growth, as in the 1950s and 1960s, was the consequence of the 'dysfunctionality' of the poor family. In an argument that was to foreground much of the Conservative thinking that was to emerge later in the 1970s and 1980s such poverty, Joseph claimed, would not be addressed through increased benefits, but by a transformation in the values and behaviour of the poor. Such thinking has also been developed and further popularised by the American social commentator, Charles Murray,

in his account of 'welfare dependency' and a developing 'underclass' in the United States and in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s. While the idea of an underclass has been around for some considerable time in the UK, having been used in the mid-1960s and early 1970s to refer to poverty among ethnic minority groups in some of Britain's urban areas, it re-emerged in a new and more potent form in the 1990s thanks largely – though not exclusively – to the work of Murray. When visiting Britain in 1999 as a guest of *The Sunday Times* to investigate if an underclass existed in this country, Murray left readers in no doubt of the 'problems' that the underclass posed for UK society:

"I arrived in Britain earlier this year ... a visitor from a plague area, come to see whether the disease is spreading and (my) conclusions were as dramatic as they were predictable: Britain has a growing population of working-aged, healthy people who live in a different world from other Britons, who are raising their children to live in it, and whose values are now contaminating the life of entire neighbourhoods."⁷

While widely criticised during the 1990s and to some extent overtaken by the idea of social exclusion, the ideology of an underclass has not disappeared without a fight and indeed has re-emerged of late in different contexts. Following the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in late August 2005, for instance, Murray once more takes the opportunity to highlight what he sees as the most pressing 'social problem' in the contemporary United States, the 'underclass':

"Watching the courage of ordinary low-income people as they deal with the aftermath of Katrina and Rita, it is hard to decide which politicians are more contemptible – Democrats who are rediscovering poverty and blaming it on George W. Bush, or Republicans who are rediscovering poverty and claiming that the government can fix it. Both sides are unwilling to face reality: We haven't rediscovered poverty, we have rediscovered the underclass; the underclass has been growing during all the years that people were ignoring it, including the Clinton years; and the programs politicians tout as solutions are a mismatch for the people who constitute the problem. ... Other images show us the face of the hard problem: those of the looters and thugs, and those of inert women doing nothing to help themselves or their children. They are the underclass."⁸

In this one quote many of the recurring features of underclass explanations are laid bare: a distinction is drawn, in a language not too dissimilar from Blair and New Labour, between the 'hard working' and the 'inert'; crime and disorder are flagged as particular concerns; inadequate parenting (on the part of mothers if not fathers) is given attention and implicit here, if not in other responses to Katrina that mobilised underclass ways of thinking,⁹ state policies (and in particular welfare policies) are viewed as an important part of 'the problem' in that they contribute to the 'growth of the underclass'.

Reframing Poverty in Scotland Today

While explicit references to the existence of an underclass rarely feature in discussions of poverty in Scotland today, we should not be mistaken in believing as a result that the influence of such thinking has completely waned. Indeed, as highlighted at the outset of this article, we can only too quickly locate 'underclass' and other cultural-based ways of thinking. To illustrate this let us first of all return to Mr Murphy and to his politics of aspiration and his view that we need to 'reframe the poverty debate':

"If we are to continue to make real progress we need to reframe the debate on poverty. We should also reflect on whether government should approach poverty differently. In the past we sometimes spoke of the politics of aspiration as though it was distinct from the politics of poverty, but the politics of aspiration



and the politics of poverty are two sides of the same coin. There has been real and significant progress in tackling poverty in our society. *Despite this improvement, entrenched pockets of deprivation still undermine the progress we have made.* We have not yet managed to *crack the cycle of intergenerational poverty.* Inequalities in aspiration of parents drive inequalities in attainment for their children at schools. *The aspirations of poorer children differ from those who are better off – from the presents children ask for on their birthday, to the careers they want when they grow up.* If a boy's parent is convicted of a criminal offence, he is twice as likely to be convicted himself. Relative generational mobility has fallen over time. Today we are paying the price for the policy failures of previous decades. *The cycle of mobility, even as its peak, has been painfully slow.*" (emphasis added)¹⁰

Elsewhere he argues that the task for New Labour is to anticipate

"...the almost limitless aspirations of the many and *lifting the near-fatalistic intergenerational poverty of aspiration of the few.* We should also have a renewed confidence in eradicating poverty by transforming and reframing the consent to go further. And we must not falter at the thought of further transformation of public services." (emphasis added)¹¹

I hope that readers will forgive the inclusion of a lengthy extract from Murphy here¹² but these do show in stark terms some of the important ways in which poverty is now being approached by the emerging post-Blair new New Labour leadership. Murphy proceeds here to talk of the need to develop a 'modern form of social solidarity' 'based upon a renewed sense of progressive self-interest'.¹³ There are some significant pointers here to the likely future direction of New Labour policy-making in relation to poverty. 'Traditional' (for which read Old Labour/post-War social democratic) approaches to social solidarity are immediately ruled out in favour of a 'modern' approach that focuses on 'aspirations' and attitudes. In turn any sense of redistribution as a means of addressing poverty and inequality is also ruled out. The idea that we can have something called 'progressive self-interest' (or even 'growth with fairness') must surely compete with 'competition and cohesion' for the top slot in New Labour's ever lengthening list of contradictory 'buzz-phrases'. But this must send a shudder through those who are campaigning to have poverty, understood in relation to wealth and inequality, at the centre of social policy making.

Murphy's arguments might be dismissed as mere pamphleteering, as blue (as opposed to red!) -skies thinking, ideas that will not be reflected in policy outcomes. But there are two responses to this which means that we should take his ideas seriously. The first is that New Labour is already processing apace with 'personalisation' agendas which are increasingly informing social and public services delivery across the UK now.¹⁴ In other words further 'reforms' of public services and the even-greater emphasis on the consumer ('progressive self-interest!') and on choice is happening *now!* The second reason for being cautious in simply dismissing such thinking is that it shares in important respects what I would call

here 'ways of thinking' about poverty, disadvantage and inequality which are emerging in other social commentary in Scotland today; ways of thinking that echo in some respects the cultures of poverty theories of the 1970s and other 'culture-centred' explanations. These overlap to some extent with the growth in socio-psychological explanations of 'well-being'.

Regular readers of *Variant* will have come across critical examinations of the growth in the 'happiness' industry and emerging 'therapy' culture in Scotland in previous articles by Alex Law and Colin Clark in 2005 and 2006.¹⁵ Among other developments Clark notes in particular the growing influence, at least on the ex-First Minister Jack McConnell and the previous Scottish Executive, of ideas generated from the Scottish Centre for Confidence and Well-Being which would have us believe that it is a 'crisis of confidence' (reflected in the prevalence of a 'dependency culture' across parts of Scottish society) which is holding ordinary Scots 'back' from achieving their potential and therefore from prospering like the 'rest of us'!¹⁶ In such thinking any idea that inequalities of wealth, income, power and life chances play a role in shaping people's lives is immediately kicked into touch. As Law has powerfully argued, this reflects the neo-liberal agenda which is being rolled out in the devolved Scotland.

It would be mistaken to think that there is no awareness at all on the part of New Labour and among politicians of the other main political parties in Scotland that structural factors contribute to the production and reproduction of poverty. However, in some respects these are acknowledged but then immediately dismissed or at best 'sidelined' as factors 'beyond' the control of politicians and of the government (both in Scotland and at UK level), such as long-term social, economic and demographic change or, more often, 'globalisation'. A focus on individual deficiencies, family 'dysfunctioning' and assorted behavioural traits of one kind or another immediately becomes central. Adopting a structural approach of the kind that locates poverty in the context of class inequalities, exploitation and oppression does not even begin to feature in many of the dominant understandings of poverty.

Some examples of the way in which structural factors are recognised but simultaneously relegated have emerged in recent months each privileging 'non-material' factors! Reflecting on a Report from the Office of National Statistics that showed Glasgow men to be twice as likely to die from the effects of alcohol compared with anyone else, broadcaster and journalist Lesley Riddoch in a commentary in *The Scotsman* in February 2007 speaks of the "problems of working-class Glasgow" and of a culture of excess enjoyed by "a demoralised underclass."¹⁷ Again in February at conference on 'Transcending Poverties' in Glasgow, organised by the Royal Society of Edinburgh (and supported by the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland), previewed in a special edition of *The Herald's Society* supplement which was entirely devoted to the theme of poverty, there is repeated references to the need for the poor to take 'responsibility' for their own well-being, to spend their money on things other than cigarettes and alcohol. Prominent Scottish historian Tom Devine captured the thrust of this conference arguing that,

"This conference is important because it moves outside the orthodoxy of improving aspects such as employment, area regeneration or health campaigns and tries to look at the extent to which there must be cultural and indeed even spiritual underpinnings for this malaise."¹⁸

He continues:

"We can examine why the majority with means are unwilling to be taxed. If you are dealing with a straightforward transfer of surplus from the better-off

to the less well-off there is always the possibility of dependency. Redistribution of wealth in itself might not be the cure and simply perpetuate the malaise. I don't think the old methods of taxing the rich to help the poor will really work."¹⁹

In a related article on February 23, *Herald* journalist Alf Young, alongside castigating what he termed the 'poverty industry', chimed with Devine's arguments by claiming that: "Redistributist fiscal policies have their part to play. But we also need to rebuild the non-material pathways that were open to people like me nearly half a century ago. Otherwise the poor will always be with us."²⁰

Another Kind of Reframing is Possible – and Urgently Needed!

It is deeply worrying that after decades of important research and much debate around the underlying causes of poverty that anti-poverty campaigners across the UK today find themselves once more facing deeply regressive ideas and thinking, some example of which have been highlighted above. Claims of a 'malaise' (and why is it that the poor are regarded as a malaise – are the rich not a 'malaise?') – or of suggestions that 'the poor will always be with us' echo 19th century commentary on poverty; ideas of 'dependency' (again of the poor not of the wealthy) as well as reflecting cultural and underclass thinking. However, this shift to a more explicit individual and cultural focus fits well with the renewed claims of New Labour Ministers that "only work ends poverty" and that "benefits do not lift people out of poverty in this country, and it has never been the case that they do."²¹ And such thinking also finds a ready home in the celebration of the market that lies at the centre of the entire New Labour project. Jack McConnell, in his final weeks as First Minister spoke of his "top 10 challenges" to "accelerate progress to end poverty." There will be no prizes for guessing what was number one on the list – "we must continue with a stable environment for business to prosper... We need a stable, growing economy, with minimum risk, for business to flourish!"²²

The challenges facing poverty campaigners are arriving from different directions as we have seen and these are coming together in a queasy mix of neo-liberal, individual, cultural centred and pseudo-psychological ramblings. Against this we do need to reframe the poverty debate, yes once again, by emphasising the structural factors that generate poverty and disadvantage; by highlighting at each and every opportunity the class inequalities and unequal and exploitative social relations which so permeate Scottish and UK society today. This also involves 'moving upstream' in both our focus and analysis to concentrate more on the reproduction of wealth and power among a privileged minority of the rich. It is shameful that in a period when the gulf between rich and poor is reaching levels unsurpassed for well over a century that so little attention is devoted to the activities of the rich. This means, above all, analysing the class dynamics of society today,²³ challenging the uncritical celebrations of market-based economic and social policies and fighting for a more socially just Scotland.



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Notes

- 1 For speech access www.jimmurphy.labour.co.uk
- 2 'Jim Murphy, 'Progressive Self-Interest – the Politics of Poverty and Aspiration', in Social Market Foundation, *The Politics of Aspiration*, London, SMF, 2007 available at www.smf.co.uk see also James Purnell and Jim Murphy, 'The battle lines are aspiration versus conservation', *The Times*, March 26, 2007.
- 3 See for example John McKendrick, Gerry Mooney, John Dickie and Peter Kelly (eds) *Poverty in Scotland 2007*, London: Child Poverty Action Group.
- 4 For a general discussion of these issues see Dee Cook, *Criminal and Social Justice*, London, Sage, 2006.
- 5 See Jock Young, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, Sage, 2007.
- 6 See Ruth Lister, *Poverty*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004 and John Welshman, 'The Cycle of Deprivation and the Concept of the Underclass', *Benefits*, 3, 1, October, 2002, 199-205.
- 7 Charles Murray, *The Emerging British Underclass*, London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1990, p.4
- 8 Charles Murray, 'The Hallmark of the Underclass', *The Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 2005, www.opinionjournal.com (accessed January 16, 2007).
- 9 For a comprehensive and well argued discussion of neo-liberal responses to Hurricane Katrina see Jamie Peck, 'Neoliberal Hurricane: Who Framed New Orleans?' in Panitch, L. and Leys, C. (eds) *Coming to Terms with Nature: Socialist Register 2007*, London: Merlin Press: 102-129.
- 10 'Jim Murphy, 'Progressive Self-Interest – the Politics of Poverty and Aspiration', in Social Market Foundation, *The Politics of Aspiration*, London, SMF, 2007, p.14-15.
- 11 Ibid. p.19
- 12 An extract which contains some very contentious claims regarding New Labour's success in tackling poverty and addressing inequality. See McKendrick, Mooney, Dickie and Kelly, 2007 op cit, for a more 'measured' assessment.
- 13 Ibid. p.15.
- 14 For a critique of such agendas see Iain Ferguson, 'Increasing User Choice or Privatizing Risk? The Antinomies of Personalization', *British Journal of Social Work*, 2007.
- 15 Alex Law, 'The Conformist Imagination: Think-Tankery versus Utopian Scotland', *Variant*, 23, Summer, 2005 and Colin Clark, 'From Self to Structure: challenging the 'happiness industry'', *Variant*, 27, Winter, 2006.
- 16 Carol Craig, *The Scot's Crisis of Confidence*, Edinburgh, Big Thinking, 2003.
- 17 Lesley Riddoch, 'A City Revelling in Denial and Altered Reality', *The Scotsman*, February 26, 2007.
- 18 Tom Devine, 'Glasgow could be a laboratory to test how we tackle the ills of modern society', *The Herald Society*, January 30, 2007, p.10.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Alf Young, 'A paucity of ideas for how to tackle poverty', *The Herald*, February 23, 2007. See also response by Peter Kelly of The Poverty Alliance, 'Low pay and predatory lenders are the power behind the real poverty industry', *The Herald Society*, March 6, 2007. Both can be accessed at: <http://www.povertyalliance.org/html/publications/pressReleases/press.asp>

- 21 Jim Murphy, speaking at a DWP organised international conference on welfare reform, London, March 26, 2007. See Nicholas Timmins and Andrew Taylor, 'Only work ends poverty, says minister', *Financial Times*, March 26, 2007.
- 22 Jack McConnell, Speech on Poverty in Scotland at the Launch of *Poverty in Scotland 2007*, Glasgow, March 2, 2007.
- 23 See for example Alex Law and Gerry Mooney, "We've Never Had it So Good": The 'Problem' of the Working Class in the Devolved Scotland', *Critical Social Policy*, 26, 3, 2006, pp.523-542.