

Transcript: Whose responsibility is poverty?

The following transcript contains the speeches delivered at a briefing hosted by Webb Memorial Trust on Wednesday 26 October 2016, entitled *Whose responsibility is poverty?*

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Neil Gray MP, Vice Chair, APPG on Poverty

“Thank you for coming in this morning for the APPG on poverty event with the Webb Memorial Trust, ‘A Good Society Without Poverty’ and the launch of the New Statesman’s supplement. I am the Co- Chair of the APPG on poverty. Kevin Hollinrake the Conservative MP can’t be here, he’s the other co-chair. I am the SNP MP for ---- and I also speak for the party here at Westminster on fair work and employment.”

“Were in for a fascinating discussion today having read the supplement very quickly last night and I’m looking forward to having a proper thorough read and listening to the speeches. I think what we’re going to hear is very challenging to us all around how we eradicate poverty and where the movement is going.

I’d like to introduce some of the speakers. Barry Knight is here as principle for the Webb Memorial Trust. His piece in the supplement discussed a different model of power and the fact that the top down approach hasn’t worked and we need to, in a post Brexit Britain, move on from that.

Dr Mike Wharton from Warwick University develops on that theme in his article and says if you want a society free from poverty then you are partly responsible for making that happen. Discussing the fact that the neoliberal dominance from the late 70’s onwards means that welfare has become a dirty word. I have to say, sitting in the Commons that is true, and we’re discussing language today as well. The Scottish government with some of its devolved powers coming forward is looking to discuss social security rather than benefits or welfare, returning to the theme of there being a safety net for people.

Andrew Curtis is the UK Senior Programme Manager from Oxfam, he’s speaking on behalf of Justin Watson who unfortunately can’t be here today and we can expect a very strong critique of the third sector and their way of dealing with poverty.

Rhys Farthing is a social policy analyst specialising in youth and poverty, she suggests there is a youth shaming attitude in regard to poverty, which we can actually see in government policy coming forward; we’ve got the so called national living wage, which is neither one nor the other, that is only available to the over 25s. We’ve also got housing benefit being removed from everyone under the age of 25. So we have an expectation coming from the current government that supports Rhys’s statement. She reminds us that the good society of the future needs its foundations laid now.

Olivia Bailey is the research director for the Fabian Society and sets out a 6-point plan around language, aspiration, fairness, economics, universalism and the meaning of poverty. I’m really looking forward to what should be a fascinating meeting and I open to the panel.

Andrew Curtis, UK Senior Programme Manager, Oxfam GB:

“Within the broader question; ‘whose responsibility is poverty’, I want to address ‘is the third sector failing?’ The third sector charities, voluntary and community groups make a difference to millions of lives in the UK and around the world every day but coverage of poor practice in recent months has prompted a long overdue conversation in the sector about if and how we could achieve more, and where we are and aren't getting it right.

“It's easy in one sense to see why the third sector is failing and finding things so challenging. Cuts across the board have hit those at the bottom hardest, meaning more demand for services. Yet many local services have vanished and those that continue are increasingly being provided by charities rather than government. This is a huge transfer of responsibility and risk from the state to the third sector. Meanwhile, as divisions across the country dominate social, political and media discussion, and the schism between the haves and the have nots is shown in ever sharper focus - the space for the third sector to influence continues to be squeezed. In this challenging operating environment we need to ask ourselves even more often, what are we getting wrong in the third sector?

“There is growing consensus that the narratives used in the third sector, however well-meaning and right, have been rejected. Take poverty for example, a term that is politically divisive, creates stigma and is highly contested to the point of still having to persuade people that poverty exists in the UK. We can't lay blame at the door of the third sector but we don't help ourselves. We often veer towards wanting to convert rather than convince, showing our outrage at the injustice of the issue and the fight for it to be taken seriously, without considering our audience. We need to create a new narrative, a new way of speaking. We need to speak with one voice, with those directly affected, not for them and we need to speak louder.

“The third sector reflects in many ways, why that social traits around competitiveness, fuelled by public funding cuts, increased need and an environment still focused on funding individual organisations to deliver specific interventions with discreet impact. So we end up in a race for the money rather than a collective approach.

“As an Australian when first in London completing some consulting work, I was astonished to find four small struggling charities all providing services to people with learning disabilities, located within metres of each other, competing for the same diminishing pot of money and abhorrent at the thought that the future may not be determined by competing but by collaborating with each other. This approach also drives short-termism. What can we really do with a project in one, two or three years? The answer is probably not very much, especially if you are doing it alone.

“With devolved responsibility and accountability from national to local, both government and more broadly the opportunity for communities to directly inform and influence decisions made about them should be rapidly growing and in some senses it is.

“The American Aid Foundation has charted a rise in local community activism and engagement but this is within a hugely challenging context of local economics left behind by globalisation. In this environment, are large NGOs getting in the way?

“At a recent event bringing together NGOs, academics and community organisations, we were told in no uncertain terms, there is a "sticky middle" of organisations who act

as facilitators between communities and power, who filter and distort community voices for their own means. This is a constant challenge across the sector, with large NGOs seeking to find their place within and for communities. We need to think carefully about our role, our added value, and how we can leverage this in support of communities directly and for their needs, rather than just looking to meet our organisation's specific, insular agendas.

“So, what can we do about it? The answer has to be collaboration. We do this already all the time, or at least we never stop talking about it, but there must be more action. We need to work together, pool our resources, share learning, ideas, skills, expertise and funding. The third sector should be a backbone, not a blocker at a local level. Supporting, collaborating and convening on the terms of communities themselves and community organisations.

“Finally, let's be more innovative in how we achieve these aims. Collaboration outside the sector is critical too. Bringing in the skills and expertise from the business community government and the public sector. Real change will only come when collective impact is embraced. Through our collective voice and actions, there is the potential to play a critical role in the establishment of a good society without poverty, but it will only happen if we do it together.”

Dr Michael Orton, Warwick University Institute for Employment Research:

“Webb Memorial Trust are very good at asking challenging questions. It's a little while ago now that Barry Knight from Webb asked why is it that every month, feels like every week, a new report comes out on poverty but it seems like nothing changes? He threw down the gauntlet then, saying we need to stop describing problems, we need to put our energy into finding solutions and creating the kind of world we want. For this special New Statesman supplement, Webb has again asked a challenging question: who's responsibility is it to tackle poverty? Whose job is it to create a good society, one without poverty?

“There is a temptation to respond saying, we are all responsible. Different articles in the special supplement show how businesses, councils and so on can, and do, take actions to help alleviate poverty. But there is an element of truism in there, because for just as many great businesses, there are also Sports Directs, and many similar who use zero hours contracts and the minimum wage, contributing directly to levels of poverty. Here in parts of Westminster, we can think of the huge number of decisions the government makes, that impacts directly on poverty. It can mean the triple lock on pensions, the other steps which create a really good story, poverty reduction for old people. Or we can look at other measures which lead to very different outcomes - people in work ending up at food banks and so on. Everyone can play a part but not everyone wants to, or sees reducing poverty as a priority.

“All of us are not motivated by a desire to reduce poverty. Also saying that tackling poverty is everyone's responsibility, dilutes the issue of who is it who is responsible for making the case of a good society without poverty, and the answer is - the people who want it. Poverty, along with many, many other issues, is contested. In a democracy, thankfully, we assume those are givens and rather than fighting them out violently. Nevertheless, it is a contest between competing ideas, values, arguments and interests. Who it is that wants a good society without poverty? As Andrew alluded to, there are organisations that their reasons for existence are poverty related. Huge numbers of organisations sign up to things like the End Child Poverty campaign. What's going on? It partly echoes what Andrew was saying. A really interesting important piece of work of canvassing New Economics Foundation, which did a review of what they called - progressive society outside of politics - and that found all the usual things about

siloed working, competition for resources and so on, but what that review identified as the biggest gap was a lack of a shared vision. It said there are overlapping strong values around social justice but there aren't common underpinning ways that these are expressed in values. So we end up with those failings that Andrew described. You get into shopping list politics, scores of separate manifestos, contradictory policy ideas, or as Barry said, every week a new report comes out and nothing changes.

“Primary responsibility for instigating good society, lies with the people want it, and the suggestion is that the gap that needs addressing first of all is a shared vision of what it is that good society looks like. I could stop there, we need a new vision, but the challenging question says that's not good enough, we need to set out that vision.

“I drew from another piece of work, supported by Webb. Part of the work for this was me going around a wide range of social actors from across the centre right and centre left and asking what is a good society and the answers come out in this report and what I have put in as my contribution to the supplement as being, a good society is somewhere we all have decent, basic standard of living, we are secure, free to choose how to live our lives, developing our potential, flourishing materially and emotionally. Participating and contributing, treating all with care and respect and building a fair and sustainable future for the next generation. I'm not going to say this is the best thing since sliced bread, I just write down the answers, the easy bit. But I will say two things; first, what we currently have as a shared vision - this is a blank bit of paper and this is a big step forward and what I'd say second is that I haven't seen anything better. So to tie up the points, what I would really like to convey, is what Andrew was saying; a shared vision – shared is the key word. It means not working in silos, not seeing cooperation as the thing we do at the end of the day, it means consensus building. Working together has to be at the core of what we do and seeing that cooperation as a strength, to see compromise as a strength as well rather than existing on the brilliance of our individual organisation's view.

“In terms of this vision, what I would say is, instead of launching into ideological deconstructions of it, picking out the bits you really dislike - have a look, generally, is there any that is in any way you can identify with, bits that you could live with? If there's one thing we can agree with, if there's one thing then we have a basis for consensus. If there are things you don't like in it, suggest better, at least moves on the debate.”

Rhys Farthing, a social policy analyst who specialises in youth and poverty:

“I'd like to start by thanking the Webb Memorial Trust for giving us this space to discuss this really important issue. It's really easy in all the work we do on a daily basis, to overlook the need to talk about who actually has to be involved in ending poverty. When we get drawn down these rabbit warrens, and constantly firefighting issues that are going on, creating a space to talk about who needs to be involved is really vital.

“I've been brought in today to talk about the potential role of involving children and young people in our quest to create good society without poverty. I'll build on Andrew's and Justin's contribution by looking at the role of the charity sector and the progressive movement at large. I am focusing on them because I believe a lot of us in this room can do much better when it comes to involving children and young people. At the moment the third sector almost has this binary that it operates in where either we try to fix the world for children and young people or we run these really broad campaigns about important issues or we go down another path where we try to fix children and young people themselves. We try to steel them up or address specific issues as if by somehow improving their human capital alone can end poverty in this world.

“I think both these approaches, while incredibly necessary, actually bring in a lot more of those, kind of miss a hugely valid point, the one you are making about the need for a shared vision and consensus. Children and young people are actually some of the best assets that lower income communities have and if we can work with them, if we can support them, they can change their world for the better.

“This approach works, I know it sounds insane but I spent five years, between 2010 and 2015 wandering around England talking to groups of children and young people and doing just that – I’d turn up in low income areas and say - hey there is a conversation going on about how to improve your communities and improve your lives, do you want to have your say and to get involved? Without fail, every child and young person I spoke to said - yes I want to have my say and do something and they said absolutely wonderful, articulate, brilliant, intelligent things about the changes they wanted to see. They were able to identify issues, some super local and some national and international, that I haven’t heard many people talk about when it comes to poverty before. They were issues that mattered to them. They were able to identify solutions that quite often adult decision makers hadn’t spotted or had thought about and dismissed and were able to rethink when we had discussions later on.

“They were able to achieve results that many progressives would actually tick off as huge. One area I worked in, the children and young people identified transport costs as a huge issue, particularly the cost of buying concession cards to prove you were entitled to discounted travel because you were young. After our conversation, subsequently they decided to take some action on this and they fundraised to buy a whole bunch of concession cards to hand out to young people who couldn’t afford it. Before this they talked to the transport company that sold the concession cards for five quid a pop and told them they felt it was basically a nonsense that low income young people had to spend their money to entitle them to discount travel and it was desperately cruel that often it was the low income young people who couldn’t afford to buy the concession card to access the discounted travel that their richer peers could so easily afford to purchase.

“They were able to humanise the issue and embarrass the travel company, who turned around and donated £70,000 worth of free travel cards to their community for low income young people. They were able to make a real effective change. More importantly they were able to change their own lives in ways that meant a lot to them. One young person I spoke to said 'this process left us feeling incredibly empowered. As she said, ‘We spoke to our MPs and decision makers, this made us liberated, like someone does want to listen. However, we have much more to say.’”

“There are two really good reasons for us to start thinking about how we can involve children and young people in our anti -poverty work. Child poverty remains incredibly high, at the same time, youth poverty – that’s 18-24-year-olds in the UK, has surged. Since 2010, 18-24-year-olds are now the highest risk of poverty, followed by children, then working age adults and old age pensioners. Given that, it’s only right we include them in these conversations about how we create a world without poverty.

“Secondly, and I think we’re all going along this thread, I think we have to try something new. Our ways of trying to create a world without poverty have been tried and tested and got us this far. It’s amazing what we have done but we need to do so much more. No battle has ever been won forever; you get good welfare reform, brilliant, but another welfare reform comes in that

makes the situation worse for our community. We deliver a programme to get 1000 young people incredible jobs and help them escape poverty, but 1000 young people in another area fall into poverty in another way. We need to try every tactic we can think of to keep winning. Working with children and young people as a solution is a strategy we haven't tried much yet. It might be a way we might be able to find some new pathways to progress alongside the other ways."

Olivia Bailey, Research Director, The Fabian Society:

"Thank you for having me and to Webb - a great organisation doing great work and asking the right question; not how but who solves poverty.

"My contention this morning is quite a political one. The only way we can solve poverty is if people vote for it. If you look over history, spending on the welfare state directly correlates with public attitudes. My answer to the who question is, politicians and those on our left and across the third sector need to define a new narrative that brings the public with it. Because currently public attitudes are not what they need to be in order to secure a policy change that we need to see.

"I would argue that the left, Labour and other left parties, have perhaps focused too much on what John Cruddas called monetary transfer social justice, focusing income and too much on those who are very low paid. This has contributed to the 'othering' of the poor and created a 'them and us' attitude. We need to create a 'we' when it comes to poverty. In my article I tried to suggest six protocols that I think should sit at the heart of that new left narrative:

"The first is, we need to broaden what poverty means; moving away from just talking about income and not doing what the Tories do, which is just talking about individuals. But talking about poverty as something that affects all of us. If it's just about low pay it's going to be harder to make the case to those people who are worried about cuts, performing schools or lack of a voice at work or the NHS. Broadening out the concepts of poverty so it speaks to everybody. In 'The Political Brain' by a guy called Drew Weston, he talks about this a lot. He says to win public support for something you have to bridge networks and create a sense of partnership. We need a way to talk about poverty that breeds that sense of partnership.

"The second thing we need to do is re-universalise the welfare state. Talk about it as a form of social insurance against the risks we all face in our lifetimes. It will create a wider sense of social solidarity. The value of this approach can be seen in the level of public support for the NHS, as opposed to the level of public support for spending on unemployment benefits.

"The third principle is making the economic case. I read a recent report by JRF that shows £78 billion is spent related to poverty and £70 billion on benefits. There is also a really clear economic case for maximising the human resources of this country and everybody playing their full part in the economy. The IMF now says that inequality is bad for productivity and growth so there's a really strong economic case for solving poverty we need to talk about it in those terms.

"The fourth thing is fairness and reciprocity in the welfare state. I will quote Beveridge when he designed the welfare state he said "benefits in return for contributions rather than free allowances from the state are what Britain desires. In other words, something for something". I think we need to think about that a little bit more in public policy terms when we are talking about poverty. The Labour party, for example, in the last parliament started to do some of this

when they suggested you would get higher JSA if you paid more in. I think policies like this are worth exploring to try and build a broader sense of public support.

"The fifth thing is perhaps controversial, it certainly was a couple of summers ago in the Labour leadership contest before last - that is getting comfortable with the concept of aspiration. Talking about poverty we have to recognise it's not just about solving an ill, people want better for themselves and their families. It's reflected from the poorest to the middle classes, who you also need to win support from. In the last election, it was that failure to tap into that sense of aspiration for you and your family that was perhaps the reason Labour didn't win, so it has to be something that sits at the heart of a new narrative.

"The final principle is that language matter. Inequality is the defining challenge of our age but talking about it describes the problem it doesn't generate enthusiasm for solutions. The same applies to things like the cost of living prices and the squeezed middle. They are all descriptors but don't motivate people behind them. It seems superficial to talk about language but it's really important. We need to find a new framework that is a rallying point for people to get behind a raft of policies.

"I don't know what the answer is, I was thinking about the American Dream as an example of something which taps into that aspiration. In American there is huge and extreme poverty. In Britain we don't have that, we have the safety net and springboard of the welfare state. I think we should think about the 'British Promise', the security to know if you need help it's there, the springboard to get on and the guarantee of being able to do better for you and your family."

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