

The wickedness of the current rise in poverty

The explosion in food poverty and the use of food banks is a national disgrace, and undermines the UK's commitment to ensuring that all its citizens have access to food.¹

The Tories tried hard at the last election to shed their 'nasty party' image by insisting that we are all in the austerity mess together and that the NHS was safe in their hands. Indeed, I had welcomed a coalition, hoping that tension between two opposing parties would lead to policies being debated and bad strategies being overturned. All that happened was that the LibDems enjoyed the novelty of being in power and became thoroughly corrupted by supporting right wing policies. Even flagship commitments, such as student's tuition fees, were quickly overturned.

However, despite many of us warning about austerity measures years ago, we are now seeing the real effect of them in dreadful stories. We have seen a Tory commitment to sustaining the profits of the rich, to defending the bonuses of bankers (even in the EU), granting tax breaks to the wealthiest in society and completely grinding under their feet the poor, vulnerable, sick and weak. The facts of the level of this oppression are so shocking that many people just do not consider them at all.

It is my contention that God hates this and will not stand for it. Temporal judgment will hit (and is already hitting²) the nation because this government has overturned the basic requirements of God's demands for righteous rule – the protection of the poor and vulnerable.³

Definitions

Politicians may try to fudge the issue by redefining food poverty but the truth is easy to see in the actual cases out there; such as: children attending school hungry, resulting in many teachers bringing in food to feed them.⁴ In London alone 61% of teachers have given food to their students.⁵ Another pointer is the increasing number of people sleeping rough. However, there are various definitions that are used; though there is no official governmental standard.

The Centre for Economics and Business Research define food poverty as households who have to spend more than 10% of their income on food. The Food Council defines it more subjectively as an individual who is not able to obtain healthy, nutritious food. Tim Lang (Prof. of Food Policy at City University, London) says that food poverty is, '*worse diet, worse access, worse health, higher percentage of income on food and less choice from a restricted range of foods*'.

¹ Walking the Breadline; Church Action on Poverty, Niall Cooper & Sarah Dumbleton; May 2013, Executive Summary.

² Britain is currently experiencing the worst storms and floods in living memory.

³ Ps 82:3; 'Defend the poor and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and needy.' Jer 22:15; "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; Then it was well. Was not this knowing Me?" says the LORD.'

⁴ Four out of five teachers are reporting that some of their children are arriving at school hungry. Walking the Breadline; Church Action on Poverty, Niall Cooper & Sarah Dumbleton; May 2013, p6.

⁵ www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/summary%20teacher%survey.pdf

Current poverty

Every citizen of this country ought to be ashamed at the state of the poorest people in society. It is truly a national scandal. What is worse is that the most serious examples of this poverty are being hidden from the headlines.

Let us simply state some facts:

- Food poverty now affects 18% of the UK.⁶
- The number of malnutrition cases treated by the NHS has doubled since 2008.⁷
- The Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that there is a decrease in the number of calories purchased by families, plus substitution of unhealthy foods, especially in families with young children.
- Nearly 175,000 people have called the housing charity Shelter for help in the past year – an all-time high.
- Household debt is at record levels: the poorest 10% of households have debts more than four times their income. At the same time as benefit cuts, food prices have risen by 30.5% in the last five years.
- People are spending more on food but eating less. Expenditure on food has increased by nearly 20% in the last five years but the volume of food consumed has fallen by 7%.
- Various studies have shown that parents are going without food to feed their children. One in five mothers regularly go without food in order to feed their children; 16% are being treated for stress-related illnesses due to financial worries, while a third are borrowing from friends to put food on the table.⁸
- The Red Cross recently held its first mass food aid collection in the UK since 1945. Consider this, the Red Cross is giving food parcels to the poor in Britain for the first time since WWII.
- The Red Cross reports that 5.8 million people in Britain are struggling to afford everyday basics like food.
- Most of the poorest people are in working households. More working households were living in poverty than non-working ones for the first time, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.⁹ 13 million are living in poverty.¹⁰ 62% of children in poverty are in families where at least one parent has a job. Low pay and only part-time work prompted the unprecedented fall in living standards. This means that it would actually be beneficial for these people to stop working and go on benefits – the very opposite of what the government intends. In fact, pride stops these people doing that and they then rely upon food parcels just to stay alive.
- The DWP's own figures show that working adults without dependent children were the most likely group to be living in poverty.¹¹
- The Trussell Trust (one of many Christian charities giving out food) states that the numbers of food parcels given out is at an all-time high (350,000) and is increasing

⁶ The Telegraph; 1 Jan 2014. According to a report commissioned by Tesco.

⁷ 3161 in 2008/9; 5499 in 2012/13.

⁸ Netmums.

⁹ *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion* report.

¹⁰ 'Poverty' is defined as living on less than 60% of the national median; i.e. less than £128 a week for a single adult.

¹¹ BBC News, 8 December 2013.

daily, having tripled in the last year. Half a million British people are now using various foodbanks according to Oxfam.¹²

- The Trussell Trust state that one in three people requiring food parcels were children.
- Half of the people turning to food banks did so as a result of having benefit payments delayed, reduced or withdrawn.¹³
- Figures published by the Trussell Trust clearly show that changes to the benefit system are the commonest reason for people turning to food banks. These include changes to crisis loan eligibility rules, delays in payments, Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions and sickness benefit re-assessments. A third were referred because their benefits had been delayed. 15% were the results of benefits being cut or stopped. DWP figures show that £1.3bn of benefit expenditure was underpaid in 2011-12. This is money that was legally due to beneficiaries but was not received due to bureaucratic inefficiency or deliberate callousness. The Public Accounts Committee criticised the DWP for focusing on reducing overpayments and neglecting underpayments, resulting in hardship. The average weekly underpayment was 29% of their weekly amount.

Food costs for the poor

People on low incomes pay higher prices for essential goods than richer people. This is because most local markets and high street food shops (butchers, grocers etc.) have gone. Those with cars can drive to distant hyper-markets to buy cheap goods but those who have no money for transport have to buy where they can – at a premium. 85% of households with weekly income under £150 do not have a car.

Save the Children have estimated that it costs low-income households an extra £1300 a year to pay for food and essentials. Research has shown that the cheapest selection of groceries was up to 69% more expensive in the poorest parts of the country than in stores belonging to the same chain in richer areas.¹⁴ Studies have shown that life expectancy for the poor in a given borough is up to 30 years shorter than for the rich. Life expectancy for the poorest part of Glasgow is 8 years shorter than the average male life expectancy in India.¹⁵

What about the problem of obesity?

Ironically, food poverty causes obesity not starvation to death in this country. The poor have just enough to survive (but cannot pay their rent and heating bills) by purchasing unhealthy food. This food is filled with bad fats and high fructose corn syrup, which makes them fat and unhealthy. This is called modern malnutrition. In fact it is a direct cause of cancer, coronary heart disease and diabetes.

The more that succumb to this, the greater the stress / cost on the NHS in the future. The current estimate for the cost of treating ill health caused by poor diet is £4bn per annum; in the future it will be much higher at this rate. Raising benefit levels would actually save money in the long run; reducing and cutting them creates a greater long-term cost. An evaluation of the food element in current benefits shows that it is going to cause

¹² The Telegraph; 1 Jan 2014. Actually it is worse since the figures were quoted from a report nearly as year old (Walking the Breadline; Church Action on Poverty, Niall Cooper & Sarah Dumbleton; May 2013, Executive Summary.).

¹³ Walking the Breadline; Church Action on Poverty, Niall Cooper & Sarah Dumbleton; May 2013, Executive Summary.

¹⁴ George Monbiot; Captive State, (2000).

¹⁵ Sir Michael Marmot; Director of the International Institute of Society and Health.

malnutrition.¹⁶ The myth that all poor families choose to eat unhealthy food needs to be burst. Studies have shown that given extra money, most low-income families would spend it on healthy food.¹⁷

Knock-on effects of poverty

Mental health issues

The Prince's Trust published a report this week regarding the effects of austerity measures on teenagers. It showed that research revealed a direct link between joblessness and poverty, with suicidal thoughts, self-harm, alcohol and drug abuse.¹⁸ In fact this is pretty obvious. The report showed that 35% experienced mental health issues, compared to a national average of 19%. Unemployed teenagers are twice as likely to have been prescribed anti-depressants, feeling that they had nothing to live for.

The situation is worst in Northern Ireland where youth unemployment has risen by 197% since the recession began in 2008. Such unemployment is causing long-lasting mental health problems in young people, particularly in women.

The chief executive of the Royal Society for Public Health said that unemployment is a public health issue. The Prince's Trust called for urgent support from the government. The Trust itself is dealing with 58,000 disadvantaged people a year.

Suicide

A book¹⁹ by Oxford University professor Dr David Stuckler and Stamford University epidemiologist Dr Sanjay Basu show that current austerity measures not only lead to bad health but contribute towards suicides. Again this is pretty obvious. They state that across the world, austerity measures have caused more than 10,000 suicides and a million cases of depression.

It is political choice that leads to such terrible effects. Sweden, despite the recession, developed active labour market programmes helping the number of suicides to fall, despite austerity.²⁰

Other health issues

Financial cut backs and slashing local services directly contributes to worsening health issues. For instance, cutting HIV prevention budgets coincided with an increase of AIDS of over 200% in Greece since 2011. In fact, Greece experienced its first malaria outbreak in decades following budget cuts to mosquito-spraying programmes.

In the UK a hospital specialist has told me personally that loss of care homes, cuts in care home funding and tightening of care home regulations have led to old patients being dumped into hospitals to slowly die instead of caring for them in their home as they used to (which is obviously expensive, requiring nursing care and treatments). This, in turn, causes bed-blocking in hospitals, which in turn chokes the entire NHS system. The long-term effect is that reducing care home provision creates much more expensive treatment in the long run.²¹ What is worse is that busy nurses neglect the old lady in the corner of the

¹⁶ The Family Budget Unit; a charity once based at the University of York, now defunct; its data is now owned by the Minimum Income Project.

¹⁷ Helen Hosker, Institute for Optimum Nutrition.

¹⁸ Belfast Telegraph; 2 January 2014.

¹⁹ The Body Economic: Why Austerity Kills.

²⁰ Stuckler & Basu; The Body Economic: Why Austerity Kills.

²¹ Staying in a hospital bed is much more expensive than being anywhere else.

ward, who is left lonely, depressed and suffering. We have already seen evidence of this shocking treatment in scandalous cases, such as in Stafford NHS.

In Britain, 10,000 families have been pushed into homelessness by the government's austerity programme.²²

In general Stuckler and Basu show convincingly that the political choice of austerity, without social controls, leads directly to avoidable deaths and stagnation of economic growth. They also aver that evidence-based policies to improve public health boost economic growth. Investment in social welfare improves the public's health and strengthens the economy. However, the problem with the Tories today is ideological, in that they support small government and hate government intervention. However, all the evidence points to increased public spending results in faster growing economies. A healthy population is intimately connected to a healthy economy.

Even history demonstrates this. Improvements in agriculture, or inventions like horseshoes and ploughshares, led directly to population increases and the production of more food, thus a healthier people. In turn countries befitting from this became more economically powerful. Yet when public health deteriorated, as in a pandemic, the economy fell apart for many years. The benefit of Stuckler's and Basu's work is that it is based on solid historical evidence going back as far as the 30s depression in many countries.

In short, failing to ensure public welfare results in the long-term political mismanagement of the economy.

Cover up?

The Trussell Trust asked the government for publication of its recent report into why malnutrition and food poverty is so high.²³ The government has so far refused to publish their findings – it is thought that this is because the report identifies the culprit as benefit cuts and the draconian policies of Iain Duncan Smith.

Various medical experts²⁴ and some newspapers²⁵ have suggested that the government is covering up its own findings since they reveal that welfare cuts have caused the surge in food poverty and malnutrition. *'Because the government has delayed the publication of research it commissioned into the rise of emergency food aid in the UK, we can only speculate that the cause is related to the rising cost of living and increasingly austere welfare reforms'*.²⁶

Food poverty is now a medical emergency

Focusing on policies that boost the riches of the wealthy to promote the economy while creating more poor people is a ticking time-bomb that will cost the country far more in the long term. The poverty results in a greater strain on surgeries, hospitals and emergency services.

²² Dr David Stuckler and Dr Sanjay Basu.

²³ The report was commissioned by Defra and completed by an academic at Warwick University. The DWP repeatedly refused to talk to the Trussell Trust when they offered to share their data with the report's authors.

²⁴ A group of doctors and senior academics from the Medical Research Council and two universities.

²⁵ E.g. The Independent, 4 December 2013.

²⁶ Authors of a letter that include Dr David Taylor-Robinson and Prof. Margaret Whitehead of Liverpool University's Dept. of Public Health.

Health experts have already stated that the UK's food poverty is such a big problem that it should be seen as a '*public health emergency*'. This has been averred in a letter by six leading public health figures to the *British Medical Journal*.

When people are in poverty it is not just the lack of food, but slightly better off people start buying cheaper processed food because they cannot afford better quality. Children get fed much worse than before while some are going hungry. Malnutrition during childhood will lead to lifelong effects the experts have warned. This increases the risks of various diseases and chronic illness.

Influential critics

Olivier De Schutter (UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food) stated that increases in the number of food banks in developed countries was an indicator that governments are failing in their duty to protect under the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which states that citizens should have access to an adequate diet without having to compromise other basics. The British government is clearly failing this UN test.

Instead of the benefit system providing a safety net for essentials, the evidence is clear that the welfare reforms have actually created food poverty.

Savage benefit cuts and administrative mismanagement

Fuelled by irresponsible and false Daily Mail headlines, many people support benefit cuts without realising exactly what is going on. Fraudulent claims are a tiny proportion of the welfare budget (less than 1%) but these form the basis of headlines and TV exposes.

One DWP objective was to cut the disability living allowance budget by 20%, despite the fact that only 0.5% of claims are fraudulent. By its own figures the government knew that the proposals would detrimentally affect genuinely disabled people. [Thus the government itself affirms that the cuts are cynical; they are not targeting fraud but are deliberately cutting benefits to those who need it.]

DWP statistics (April 2011) showed that there was a 40% increase of people losing their Jobseeker's Allowance. In 2012 new sanctions came in which increased this figure significantly. Similar sanctions exist for the new Universal Credit. Leaked figures in Jan 2013 showed that 85,000 sanctions were applied to Jobseeker's Allowance claimants in one month and that severe targets (quotas) had been introduced to Jobcentre employees. This translates to over a million sanctions a year compared to a total of 1.5 million cases on the books. In other words, draconian measures are being forcefully applied to claimants in a ruthless, targeted manner. Legal pressure on the government has initiated an enquiry into the use of sanctions. The effects of these sanctions in creating destitution has not been evaluated. The same problems apply to other benefits sanctions, such as sickness re-assessments.²⁷

Thousands of people have had their benefit delayed through administrative mistakes, sometimes lasting months. Other have had delays to determining benefit or tax-credit claims. Changes to the IT systems in Jobcentres led to more mistakes and delay, sometimes requiring re-training of officers before benefits could be paid.

The Public Accounts Committee criticised the DWP in 2011 for its management stating that the department did not have an understanding of where and why errors arose and was not

²⁷ Sanctions includes cases where a person misses an appointment, due to a letter not being received, whereupon they lose benefit of a month and starve.

doing enough to prevent errors in the first place.²⁸ There is evidence that such errors have increased since, forcing people to apply to food banks.

In addition, the 1% cap on benefit increases made finding money for food even more difficult. 27 organisations (e.g. Oxfam UK Poverty Programme) signed a joint letter condemning this action.

Furthermore, local councils have complained that Jobcentres were sending claimants for crisis help to them from the Social Fund, or to food banks, despite the availability of a Jobcentre crisis hardship fund which was covered up.

Individual case stories (which could be multiplied if we had space) show the most appalling sagas of creating deliberate hardship to the point of people committing suicide, starving or losing their home and ending up on the street.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that one million more children will fall into poverty by 2020 and that this increase will be the result of benefit reforms.²⁹

What is the reaction of the government?

Poverty campaigner Jack Monroe launched a petition to demand a debate in the House of Commons about the state of poverty in the UK. It received over 140,000 signatures and a Opposition Day debate was initiated. In this three-hour debate MP after MP stood up to recount case after case of serious levels of poverty striking families.

For instance the case of a constituent of Roger Godsiff MP who was suddenly made redundant from a well-paid job and suffered a relationship breakdown and ended up receiving £5 per fortnight to live on benefits. She had no choice but to ask for food parcels just to avoid starving to death, but has no money for paying her mortgage or anything else. Soon (as in many other cases) she will face eviction. Others spoke of children going hungry over the weekend and being referred to a foodbank by their school.

In the face of these heart-rending stories, the Tories jeered and laughed, especially during a speech by Fiona MacTaggart (MP for Slough) describing how people battled over end of day bargains at her local Tesco, requiring extra security measures. She could hardly be heard above the jeers from government benches. Jamie Reed (MP for Copeland, Cumbria) stated that, *'The laughter from the government benches says more about this issue than words ever could.'*

Iain Duncan Smith listened for an hour, refused to answer questions, and then walked out of the chamber with a sneer on his face, leaving his subordinate (Esther McVey) to face the music. The remaining government ministers also walked out. McVey defended the current policies and blamed Labour, to which Sir Gerald Kaufman MP reacted, affirming that in over forty-years in Parliament that was the nastiest speech he had ever heard. This behaviour clearly shows that the Tory party hates the poor. The Speaker, John Bercow (a Tory) stated that he had no power to stop the ministers leaving but affirmed that it was a disgrace.

The LibDems sided with the Tories and defeated the motion to call for an inquiry by less than 50 votes (294 to 251). This alone will seal the LibDems fate at the next election.

²⁸ Reducing errors in the benefits system; Public Accounts Committee, March 2011.

²⁹ Child and working age poverty in N. Ireland, IFFS, May 2013.

This is the worst sort of callous politics that I have ever heard of in Britain. It is something well beyond anything even that Maggie Thatcher would have attempted. This unrighteous behaviour will reap what it sows in God's judgment.

The Independent Newspaper reported on this on Saturday 21 December 2013, describing the widespread condemnation of Tories for not taking poverty in the UK seriously.

But what about fixing the economy?

Fiscal responsibility is important, but not at the expense of creating new poor and worsening the lot of the existing poor.

All politicians have choices and God gives them enough resources to chose to rule equitably. Instead the Tories have chosen to give favours to the rich and to trample of the needs of the poor.

Apart from that, the government has committed billions to replacing Trident and other foolish polices, such as huge subsidies for useless wind-farm turbines (a million pounds per item). This is to say nothing of £50 million a day to the EU or the excessive costs of Parliament itself.

Favouring the rich

The most obvious thing is that the top tax rate has been changed from 50 to 45p, in a time of recession and low fiscal income no less. This benefits 267,000 people who earn more than £150,000. Furthermore, it benefits 13,000 people earning £1m an average of £100,000.³⁰

George Osborne seemed to have no qualms in sending arrogant signals when, just before the last budget, he was more active in Europe than usual defending the right of bankers to have large bonuses, being out of step with just about everybody. He failed; but it showed us where his priorities lie.

The country currently loses billions of pounds through tax avoidance; many more times than the whole welfare budget. If this was properly attacked we could solve the county's deficit overnight. However, despite pledging to tackle this in the election, George Osborne has done virtually nothing to sort it out. Could this be because it would offend too many of his wealthy friends?

Tax avoidance from global firms costs every British taxpayer at least £183 a year. Just 18 companies are responsible for £1.4bn of lost revenue. HMRC reports an additional lost revenue of £4.1 billion from other corporations. Some think tanks, and even the HMRC, have suggested that the total figure is closer to £32bn³¹ while others have suggested £120bn.³² Google alone avoided paying £224m while Apple is accused of avoiding £550m. Some multinational companies pay as little as 0.1% in tax whilst people on benefits and pensions pay dozens of times more.

Dealing with this moral theft by rich global companies could solve the financial deficit without reducing any welfare costs at all. This is a genuine option. However, the Tories are determined, by hard-wired philosophy, to protecting the interests of rich corporations because they believe that this is the route for economic prosperity. The Tories clearly care nothing for justice, righteousness or altruism, and for this they will suffer God's judgment

³⁰ According to a Labour Party statement in the Commons by Ed Balls.

³¹ Measuring Tax Gaps 2012; HMRC.

³² What's The Tax Gap? Tax Research UK, July 2012.

because national governments are required by God's law to do exactly that, focusing on defending the poor and needy above all else.

Case studies

I have avoided giving tear-jerking examples of those affected; this is due to a) keeping this paper concise and based on objective facts; b) I do not want to be accused of being emotive; c) examples are available from many other sources.

However, we must consider the results of feeling hungry and cold and needing help from a food-bank. Victims explain that their other symptoms are exacerbated as a result, ranging from depression, high blood pressure, diabetes, panic attacks as well as a general sense of embarrassment and shame. Inevitably, such folk are, in the end, going need assistance from doctors, clinics and hospitals that could have been avoided and will cost the country unnecessary expense.

A further serious problem is already manifesting itself in the rise of suicides in the country, particularly amongst the young. I myself know of a man who tried to commit suicide recently as a direct result of his benefit being stopped for no reason.

The stories of people affected by food poverty are truly shocking – and they are all unnecessary cases of suffering; suffering directly caused by this government.

Conclusion

Before readers who do not know me dismiss me as a raving lefty, they should know that for many years I was a scathing critic (in writing) of the Blair governments and opposed New Labour mismanagement and lying. The manipulation of Parliament into the illegal Iraq war alone was one of the lowest points in English history, for which Blair will face an angry God.

In fact, I oppose all party politics and my views on social government comprise policies that would be considered both left and right. For example, I believe in small, decentralised government but also in the nationalisation of utilities.

As I was writing this paper, George Osborne (Chancellor) announced that in the next few years another £12bn additional cuts need to be made to the welfare budget. This shocked even Iain Duncan Smith who is already presiding over £20bn worth of cuts to the DWP up to 2018. In an upturn in the economy (not due to the government's measures by the way but to cyclical issues and factors based on credit – such as improved car sales)³³ this seems completely unnecessary.

What is going on is ideological strategies rather than addressing the actual needs of the nation. Part of the additional cuts (according to Osborne) would be removing Housing Benefit from under-25s. This would only rapidly increase homelessness, which is already at record levels. The bulk of Housing Benefit goes to struggling working people, mostly families on low wages. To arbitrarily draw the line at 25, based on no empirical data, is worse than draconian. This is the age range that mostly needs help to get people up and running to sort their lives out. In many cases it would mean either a death sentence or forcing people into crime.

Regarding this current government I am obliged to say that it is wicked and iniquitous. No Christian can support such evil policies that will blight the country for years to come. Many

³³ Many economic commentators insist that the Tory austerity measures actually hindered economic growth and made the recession longer than necessary. At six years it is the longest recession in 150 years.

local services may never be reinstated and communities will be worse off for it. The worst aspect of Tory mismanagement is the favouring of the rich and the oppression of the poor – all to fix a problem caused by the rich in the first place. This is unjust, unrighteous, and iniquitous. God will not forget.

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