

‘If my benefit payments were paid over longer time frames, this would ease my cash flow problems and allow me to plan better’

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Beyond the Poverty Trap

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Abolishing child poverty in 20 years? That, truly, is a Millennium vision

I think of Amir with sadness and guilt. He was the first and, at that time, the only Asian boy in my class. There were several Afro-Caribbean children, more than half the class was Jewish, but Amir was different and relentlessly bullied. At 12, I ran with the crowd. Merciless. The other children's friendship was not important to me; at school you were either protected on the inside or exposed on the outside. And on the outside life was hell.

All this came back to me last July as I listened to Gordon Brown talk about his plans for abolishing child poverty over the next 20 years. He was addressing a high-profile seminar of policy experts at Downing Street. And, when he set out the 20-year target and told the seminar, 'Be radical without being credible and credible without being radical – we aim to be both,' I was reminded of a lengthy, rather more private meeting that had occurred in the same room a fortnight before.

A group of six people had been invited through Community Links to come and share their experience of poverty with the Chancellor and discuss with him policies that could change their lives. I remembered the things we had talked about during that thoughtful, private meeting and I *believed*. One million children *will* be lifted out of poverty by April 2000, three million to go. Truly, a Millennium vision.

During the same period last summer, the *Guardian* published its 1999 survey of top directors' pay, revealing average increases of more than 26 per cent, five times the growth of average earnings and ten times the rate of inflation. A couple of days later, as I stood at the bus-stop outside Newham General Hospital, I listened to a conversation between two hospital workers, in which these directors' salaries were compared with those of

a nurse, a surgeon and then an entire shift in the intensive care unit; you could throw in the Minister of Health, even the Prime Minister... the combined salaries of all these people still wouldn't top the salary of a single director with the key to the safe.

Harold Laski told a previous Labour government that you cannot tackle the problem of poverty without also tackling the problem of wealth. The Government is trying to do so – minimum wage, big increases in child benefit and income support for children under 11, Working Family Tax Credit, extra support for the poorest pensioners, etc. We can have it all, apparently. Eliminate poverty for the poor without sacrifice from the rest.

I am no economist but I know what kind of society I want for my children. A society without destitution – and anyone who believes we've got that already should spend a day at a Community Links advice session, visit our clothes bank or attend a play scheme. I want a society that sets a minimum standard of living, as six western nations have already done in the last ten years. More than that, a society that acknowledges the obscenity as well as the absurdity of huge differentials.

And that's why I remembered Amir that warm and optimistic morning in Downing Street last summer. Previous governments had talked about action for the poor but have only done things for the rich. This Government was demonstrating a commitment to tackling poverty, not just through the tax and benefit system but through Sure Start, New Deal and other major programmes.

Still, I just thought of Amir: I remembered hanging back and walking home with him, helping him with his homework, even giving him money. All this, always, when the other kids were not around. In company, on the contrary, I talked the tyrants' talk – insulting, undermining, threatening. What sense of worth did Amir take out into the world when he was eventually free of us? Even then I knew that doing things by stealth wasn't enough. It was

timid, the recourse of a follower not a leader.

I think of Amir and the bullies I never reached. I think of the Community Links families and the Chancellor in the sunny room.

In company, I would talk the tyrants' talk

I think of the top earners in the clover, and I want for the new Millennium:

1. An open debate engaging us all.

Inequality is not just an issue for the poor. Richard Wilkinson, in his book *Unhealthy Societies* (Routledge, 1996), has shown, first, that increases in social cohesion are largely dependent on reducing the size of income differences; second, that smaller differentials and increased social cohesion play an important role in reducing national death rates; and third, that in modern economies narrower income differences are associated with faster economic growth. Perhaps a Commission on Remuneration in the UK could highlight these issues, debate the ethical questions, publicise the facts and suggest a moral base for making judgments about remuneration in this new Millennium. Commission members

could be drawn from across society and the link with the Millennium would be a deliberate attempt both to depersonalise and depoliticise the process. It wouldn't be about your salary and

- insulting, undermining, threatening...

mine, here and now, but about the kind of society we want for our children and our children's children.

I have led Community Links for 21 years and received enormous support from business leaders. I am proud to count many not only as supporters but as friends. Our bank manager may worry that I am turning to savage the hand that has fed us. Those same friends will not. Respected leaders establish and consistently articulate a clear personal moral code. Day after day we cope with the consequences of poverty and we struggle with the causes. Little would have been achieved without the resources of our friends but much much more has yet to be done. We are all of the real world. We do what can be done, in our respective positions, here and now, and we wrestle with the moral dilemmas. As Jesse Jackson would say, 'God hasn't finished with any of us yet.'

2. A society that recognises not only the importance of money but also its limitations.

A couple of weeks ago I came across a prosperous family which would, in the current jargon, be considered to be at least as 'dysfunctional' as any in our poorest communities. I noticed that the 11-year-old boy had, among other things, a pristine Liverpool strip, but apparently neither friends nor family to play with. He may become a lawyer as his father expects. I think it is equally likely that he will be sleeping in Temple Gardens by the time he is 20. 'You cannot,' as Elizabeth Fry noted, 'give a child love by act of parliament.' We all need help at some time in our lives and we all have something to give, not top down, rich to poor, but two-way, for mutual fulfilment. Each of us has, like supporters of the American Civil Rights Movement, 'the power of one'. How many of us use it?

3. A state that really embraces the talents, the experience, the creativity and the energy of the many.

It is difficult to overstate the siege mentality that has grown up among many good people working in our inner-city schools, social service departments, hospitals and community agencies. Simply getting through the day, avoiding risks, keeping in touch with the league tables – these have become the extent of the vision. We need to raise people's sights and we need to do it from the top. We need to say that it is fine to take risks and we need to recognise that some risks will fail. Above all, we need to acknowledge that we share responsibility for the next generation and we all have a part to play.

4. Leadership that connects poverty and wealth, talking and doing, government and people.

Lao Tsu wrote: 'The wicked leader is he whom the people despise.

The good leader is he whom the people revere. The great leader is he whose people say, “We did it ourselves.” If we, the Millennium generation, can say in 20 years’ time, ‘We abolished poverty,’ we will truly have experienced the leadership we deserve.

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