Keeping governments on track to end child poverty:  
the role of advocacy and activism

2005 SAMBELL ORATION

Delivered by Kate Green, Child Poverty Action Group  
at the Australian Child Poverty Conference  
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I am delighted and honoured to be invited to give the Sambell Oration to the conference this morning, and to have the opportunity to meet Australian colleagues who are engaged in the same effort as Child Poverty Action Group to bring an end to child poverty in two of the world’s wealthiest countries. This is my first visit to Australia, and I’m particularly pleased that it should be to Melbourne, which in the few days I have spent here I have found beautiful, welcoming, it is a pleasure to be here. And I am also especially pleased to be asked to give this oration now, not just because I seem to have arrived at a time of political controversy, with your Treasurer Mr Costello expounding some startling new ideas about welfare reform pretty well as I stepped off my plane, but also because, 2005, marks CPAG’s 40th birthday (I know—we don’t look a day over 25!), and you know how these big birthdays make you stop and take stock. So the end of our big 40th year seems an especially fitting moment to reflect on the effectiveness of our anti-poverty work and to suggest some pointers for the future, and to share and compare with you in your rather different political environment as I look back over 40 years of activism back home.

And I hope you will forgive me if I do focus a lot in what I say on the situation back in Britain. CPAG’s work is focussed on UK policy and the very specific regulatory and legislative framework in which we operate, and so that’s my area of expertise. But much policy development in Britain in recent years has drawn from the experience of a select few countries—Australia, NZ and the US predominantly—so I hope you will find much of what I am going to say quite recognisable or familiar. I might of course want to ask whether, in looking at those Anglophone examples, Britain has necessarily drawn on the best of models around the world, or whether we should have been looking elsewhere for effective anti-poverty policies. And I might also note that we in Britain have begun to take on certain policies just as others decide to abandon them and ask what warning that gives us about the possible future fate of these policies in the UK, about their sturdiness and surviveability, and what perhaps we need to do to make successful policies stick. As our political journey has been the mirror image of yours over the past 15–20 years, as we moved from right to left
wing government and you have travelled in the opposite direction, I guess taking both the long and the broad view of political influence is an important question for us as activists on both sides of the world. So I plan to use my lecture today to consider some points about influencing and activism which I hope we can all find of relevance, which I think will be pretty universal for all of us working in the anti-poverty field, to identify and look at some of the overarching themes of the past 40 years which parallel CPAG’s existence, and to think about how we operate under governments of very varied political complexion, and what we have learnt as a result.

A little bit of history to start with. Child Poverty Action Group was formed in 1965, when interest in issues of family poverty was rife. Peter Townsend (now, I am proud to say, our president) and Brian Abel-Smith had been working on *The poor and the poorest*, a publication that I think really changed the landscape of poverty policy and discourse, and brought home with a shock the extent of child poverty in 1960s Britain and what it meant for families to be growing up poor. Although they were among our founder members, Townsend and Abel-Smith had not set out with the intention to set up an organisation called CPAG, however. That came out of a series of discussion meetings that took place over 1965 and during which it became clear to the participants that there was a need not just to theorise but to press for action. By Christmas 1965, then, the group had named itself the CPAG, and penned its first letter to the then prime minister, Harold Wilson, demanding action in the forthcoming spring Budget to raise the incomes of the poorest families.

Despite close links between a number of the leading players in CPAG and senior figures in the then Labour government—CPAG’s first general secretary, for example, had been an adviser in the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance—Labour’s policy response over the next year or so was felt by CPAG to be quite inadequate. So by 1970, CPAG had become more strident, and under its dynamic new director, Frank Field—today a Labour MP, and former social security minister in the first Blair government—it sent off another and decidedly more forceful memorandum, this time to Richard Crossman, Secretary of State for Health and Social Security, attacking the failings of the Wilson government for letting the poor get poorer under Labour.

This caused uproar. Labour ministers were furious, angrily and vociferously denying CPAG’s claims. And the recriminations were all the more bitter after the Conservatives—who certainly made hay with the dispute—won the June 1970 general election. So there were mixed views at the time as to what CPAG had truly achieved and about the sense of the tactics it had adopted. But nonetheless I guess those events did set the tone for what CPAG has been ever since—nobody’s lackey, willing to bite any hand that might feed us, our mission to point to policy failure from whatever government, and first and foremost to champion the rights of the poor. Interestingly today, by the way, that debate about our relationship with the current Labour government remains just as heated and many of the same themes are repeated about whether it’s expected CPAG should challenge or support the government—something I’ll come back to talk more about later on this morning.

In any event, the relationship with government for CPAG became both easier and harder during the years of Conservative rule from 1979. Easier, I should emphasise, mainly in the sense that there was little doubting at that time that CPAG’s absolute and outright duty was to oppose the thrust and impact of government policy—but much much harder, of course, in that policy during the 1980s and 1990s was quite disastrous for child and family poverty. CPAG’s influence was limited to mitigating the harshest effects of the worst policy interventions, but
if the organisation had been worried before that the poor had become poorer under Labour, under the Tory governments from 1979–1997, the poor became the very poorest. By 1997 Britain had the highest child poverty rate of any country in the EU, with one in three of our children growing up poor.

CPAG certainly learned a lot about lobbying in adversity from those years, and we were not totally without access or influence, working carefully with a small group of Conservative MPs and ministers, some of whom perhaps belonged more on the left of their party, but working too where we could with the grain of core Conservative values, such as the party’s attachment to the centrality of the family unit, so that for example, when universal Child Benefit came under threat from reforms proposed by the Conservative government, the successful campaign that CPAG and others pulled together to defend it had as many supporters among the blue-rinsed Tory ladies of the shires who were outraged that money for mothers to put towards their children should be under attack as it had from the anti-poverty movement. But, small successes notwithstanding, the Conservative years were exceptionally difficult ones for CPAG and very bad indeed for child poverty, and it was, I think, true right across the not-for-profit sector in the UK, and not just for organisations concerned about family poverty, that the election of the new Labour government on 1 May 1997 was greeted with delight. A government which publicly committed itself to social justice offered hope at last that injustices would be righted, the excluded reintegrated, the poor and disadvantaged given the security and the means to escape family poverty once and for all.

Sadly, though, things got off to a bad start. Labour had been elected on a promise to hold to the outgoing Conservative government’s spending plans for its first two years in office. This was intended to enable it to rebuild the confidence of a sceptical or at least wary electorate in its fiscal prudence and econ competence; and it continued to feel pressure to make this demonstration despite having secured a victory of such landslide proportions that nobody could be in any doubt that the Tory ideas of the previous 18 years had reached the end of their popular run. But it was perhaps understandable that Labour felt obliged to keep the first of its electoral promises, even though the Tories, of course, seeing the opportunity to do maximum damage even as they were on the point of being voted out of office, ensured that their legacy consisted of some of the harshest fiscal cuts of all for the financial years 1997 and 1998, and made the new government’s position even more awkward. But worse was what that meant in practice—that child poverty remained at historically high levels two years after Labour’s election and quickly the honeymoon between the not-for-profit sector and the new government was ended, and ended particularly bitterly in the battle in December 1997 over the abolition of the lone parent benefit, planned by the Tories, but implemented by New Labour.

Matters then took a turn for the better. In March 1999, Tony Blair took everyone by surprise when he announced that his government would pledge to eradicate child poverty—and do so within a generation, by 2020. There was a stunned, disbelieving but delighted response. The disbelief, I should say was rather of the order of ‘Does he have the faintest idea what he has committed to?’ It was generally felt that the true brain, the true passion behind the pledge was that of the chancellor Gordon Brown. But nonetheless CPAG and others saw immediately just how potent and valuable this pledge could be—and indeed it has proven to be especially useful as a way of keeping the subject on the political agenda, and forcing the government to design and deliver policy solutions to achieve it. Soon after, a series of interim milestones, to reduce child poverty by a quarter by 2004–05 and by half by 2010, were announced in departmental Public Service Agreements; and discussion on the way in which child poverty
would be measured and determined settled on a measure of relative income poverty, which had been very much what CPAG had always advocated.

People in Australia have been asking me where that child poverty pledge came from, and of course have reminded me that you too had a pledge, from Bob Hawke, which led for a time to improvements in your child poverty rate before you have begun to see things worsen again in more recent years. And what I now think we can see, with the pledges in both our countries, where they came from, and the fate that each has met, is that politicians do tend to go back to their roots. In the UK, the Labour politicians who came to power in 1997 had spent long years in opposition fighting poverty and injustice and—as my native poet Robert Burns would put it—nursing their wrath to keep it warm. Indeed many of our current government ministers were (and remain) members and supporters of the CPAG and had been part of the anti-poverty movement in the UK over many years—it’s in their political blood, as you might say. Once in power, they were keen to turn their long-cherished concerns into policy priorities, and I guess for us the reward of sticking with our agenda and maintaining relationships with politicians over long years when they have been out of power has today been to have a child poverty target and policies to tackle it when the Labour Party finally regained office. But there is an opposite direction to the question, I guess, from your perspective and experience, and a salutary warning for us, about the extent to which policies are truly embedded and whether future governments can come along and ignore and undo a pledge, and that’s a point I’ll come back to.

But in any event, today in Britain we do have a bold and ambitious pledge to end child poverty, a series of interim targets to ensure government is kept up to the mark, an improving position: new policy initiatives have seen child poverty reduce from 1 in 3 children to approaching 1 in 4; 700,000 children have been lifted out of poverty since 1999; and the UK has moved up from its place at the bottom of the EU league table, though we still have a long way to go to achieve the rates of child poverty achieved by the best in Europe (around a rate of 5% in some Nordic countries), to which our government now aspires. But perhaps we have a sense now in CPAG that the golden era is already ending. Even reaching the first milestone, to reduce child poverty by a quarter by 2005, looks uncertain; enthusiasm is waning in government for the child poverty target; and progress has begun to slow. So, much of what I now find myself turning my mind to is once again how CPAG behaves in more adverse political and econ circumstances—and I guess that might be a more useful debate to share with you here in Australia too.

First, let me look at how Labour did begin to turn the tide of rising child poverty after 1999, and to say just a little about the policy approach. A veritable cocktail of policies came together to help achieve the progress made. Labour identified some of the groups most vulnerable to child poverty—lone parents, families with a member experiencing disability or a health problem, the poorly paid (many overlapped of course)—and designed policies either specifically to reach those groups or by which they would disproportionately benefit. The UK government unashamedly sees work as the best route out of poverty, and has concentrated on policies to make work possible and to make it pay. Chancellor Gordon Brown, in particular, used the strength of the economy to spend on raising incomes and developed the doctrine of progressive universalism—so that all benefited to some extent but the poor benefited most—through tax credits, introduction of the National Minimum Wage, increases in Child Benefit, and labour market programmes—the successful new deals—to help the long-term unemployed and inactive into paid work. The UK government also set out to reform the child maintenance system, and invested heavily in renewal and regeneration of the poorest
neighbourhoods and communities. And they began a substantial investment in child-care provision so that, within the past eight years, we have seen the position improve from having one child-care place for every nine children under age 8 in 1997 to a place for 1 in 4 children today.

You’d recognise some of these policy initiatives, I’m sure. And you can probably tell from your own experience here in Australia which ones are likely to have succeeded, and what governments can do to support, or undermine, success. As I said a few moments ago, you will also know how easily an incoming government with a different political agenda could dismantle or weaken them and, particularly in the light of your own experience, you may therefore be surprised and rather dismayed to hear that the Labour government set about these bold and much-needed policy changes, set about taking measures to reduce child poverty and tackle disadvantage, whilst at the same time doing its very best to ensure that nobody noticed it was doing so—in other words, as many commentators in the UK have noted, it set about doing good by stealth. Arguably, it did so for well-intentioned reasons, because of a fear that a centre-left agenda could not command popular support, that it was better to do good and get away with it than to call attention to a policy agenda that might prove unpopular and be forced to give it up. But now, as we enter into the very different political world that is Blair’s third-term Labour government, the problems with such an approach are beginning to show: that as the going gets tougher, it becomes easier to abandon the more expensive policies or those that fail to deliver immediate impact, and to turn to harsher policy solutions, knowing that no public outcry will take place to stop this—since the public have no idea what can and has already been achieved, or how it has been done.

And I blame ourselves in the lobby groups, at least in part, for finding ourselves in that position. As new policies were introduced from the late 1990s, CPAG found itself occupying a position really, now that I look back on it, of extraordinary privilege. We were well inside the tent of policy development, we became in a sense a part of the system, we were able to participate very closely in helping to set the agenda, design the policy solutions, and even participate in their delivery—and were funded by the government to do so.

But even then, with the privilege of access came danger too. First, perhaps, that we were a little too complacent: we did not do enough to ensure that we made anti-poverty policy an inevitability, a political must-have; we were too reassured that political priorities had at last changed, and so we failed to emphasise enough the gains that anti-poverty measures were bringing to everyone in the country, that poverty impoverishes all of us, and that tackling it is a matter not just of social justice but also of econ good sense. Poverty after all is expensive—of course for the families who experience it, but for society as a whole too – the burden it places on educ and health services, the damage to neighbourhoods and business, and the waste of our children’s future potential—all cost a country dear when it tolerates high child poverty rates. Now, I think we did not do enough make what you might call the business case for tackling poverty when we should have – and securing the greater political and public buy-in that could have been achieved.

And there was a risk too that we’d become too cosy with the government, that we might be less critical than we ought. Though I don’t think that really ever happened, I do think now that our close involvement in policy design backfired at least to some extent when some of the delivery began to go wrong, that we gave the government an opportunity to implicate us in the design of the failing policies and to seek to weaken our criticism as a result.
And we are certainly seeing that happening. This third Labour government is not very like the last two. The economic climate is harsher, the economy is slowing down. Blair’s majority is smaller (though far from small), his political authority weaker, his determination to leave a legacy of radical change, in what we know of course to be his last term in office, is greater than ever before. The increasing failure of his foreign policy ventures has led him to turn his attention more to the domestic agenda, turn to it in a way that does not however suggest much interest in achievement of the child poverty pledge. And all around him governments of the centre-left are falling—in the US, in Germany, France, here too in Australia, the right is in the ascendant. His political buddies and soul mates are increasingly of the political right, and his agenda has moved noticeably rightwards too.

So trends now are rather alarming. Progress on reducing child poverty is slowing. We don’t know for sure, but it seems quite conceivable that our government might just miss its first milestone, to reduce child poverty by a quarter by 2005; and if it misses this first milestone—the easy bit in a sense, moving those just below the poverty line to just above it—how much more doubtful does the pledge to eradicate child poverty, which will need to reach those in the deepest and the most persistent poverty, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, begin to look now? We are seeing a set of delivery failures beginning to bite—the introduction of new tax credits has been bedevilled with errors and overpayments, efforts to reform the child support system have so far been little short of a shambles, and worrying reports are beginning to emerge now about problems with a new computer system for processing social security payments. The public service unions are resentful: to make the economic books balance, swinging job cuts have been announced across government, but especially in the welfare department, the DWP. And increasingly we find ourselves living with a government that demonstrates itself to be rather uninterested in a welfare state based on any notion of citizens’ rights and entitlements, its emphasis being much more on the idea of a ‘deal’ between state and citizen—‘something for something’ as the outgoing Work and Pensions Secretary David Blunkett put it—rather than a right to a decent income on which to raise a family at the heart of the modern welfare state.

Where meantime is the Chancellor, the driving force behind the UK government’s child poverty ambitions, as all of this goes on? You probably know the answer. He is nursing his leadership ambitions—nothing must be allowed to get in the way of a Brown succession when Blair finally goes. So the Chancellor’s game is a highly canny and a highly risk-free one; and criticism and complaint—even friendly criticism—of his child poverty policies is absolutely not tolerated. The Chancellor cannot and will not be associated with policy failure now.

So all of this is making CPAG’s life a little more interesting and a little more difficult in this third Labour term. And as a result, we are I think moving on from the role of critical friend, becoming rather more critical, rather less friendly, though I have to admit we are struggling to get the balance right. Because of course it is only the Labour Party in Britain that has made a pledge to end child poverty, that has proposed a set of policy solutions to enable it to do so. So I do now find myself increasingly lurching between the role of crawling sycophant and screeching harpy in my dealings with the government; and that’s a difficult balance to get right. It’s perhaps not too surprising then that it seems important at this point in our history, and in the Labour government’s history, to think about whether we need to relearn some old tricks, revisit some of what we learnt in the Wilson and Crossman days, even from the Tory era, and reapply it now.
And in this new world, the first thing that I think in practice we are doing more of is re-engaging with Parliament. During the first two Labour administrations, almost all of CPAG’s conversations with politicians were with government ministers, and with their officials and advisers. We spent little time with the backbench MPs, and we saw little need to do so: the policy initiatives were coming from the government, the direction they were taking we felt to be broadly the right one, and our job was to help to hone and enhance what was emerging. But today, now that delivery is looking more difficult, now that government is perhaps panicking a little, feels the need to get harsher to achieve the child poverty target through taking more assertive routes to push people into paid work, to increase conditionality, and now of course that its parliamentary majority is smaller, and backbenchers more willing to throw their weight about, parliament is becoming more interesting again as a place for influencing and pressing for policy change.

One of the more challenging questions for us now as parliament regains its importance—and this would be true even if we had a right wing government in power—is the extent to which we engage with the backbench politicians of the government party, and the extent to which we should work with opposition MPs. This is a very tricky one to get right. First of all, in the UK at least, our legal status as an independent charity, with the reputational advantage, not to mention the tax breaks, that we enjoy as a result—depends upon our being non-partisan. So we need relationships with all the political parties, and of course, looking ahead to the possibility at least that the next government may not be a majority Labour one, I am quite sure that it is the right long-term strategy for us to be in dialogue with politicians of all the major parties and to make sure we box every future government into having to tackle child poverty by getting commitments from all parties now—including those in opposition. But in terms of influencing, persuading the government to improve or change policy, it’s arguable that it’s more likely still to respond to pressure from its own backbenchers, rather than to concede influence to the Opposition. So much of our effort now goes on finding a few credible, courageous, independent-minded and forceful government backbenchers who can advocate our position in parliament.

But whilst it’s nice to see the role of the parliamentarian coming back centre stage in these early days of the third Labour administration, I have to say it is not at all clear yet just how much influence and effect they will truly be able to have. So relationships with officials remain important too. Quiet dialogue with policy-makers remains important to continue to hone and improve policy, both to go with the grain of government thinking and to try to advance it, to suggest where policy must next direct its attention, to make constructive proposals for change, and to suggest the political economic and social rewards that can result.

So this year, for example CPAG published a report, At greatest risk: the children most likely to be poor, which suggests that policy needs now to get smarter and more interested in reaching the most vulnerable children, those in deepest and most persistent poverty, identifying who those children are, the extent to which they overlap, the gaps in data and knowledge, and the ways in which policy might be developed to meet their needs. At greatest risk has been well received by government, and has been the basis of a constructive and focused conversation about particular areas of policy development, and it is I think important that we as pressure groups learn to do more of that forward-looking policy development rather than simply standing shouting crossly from the outside when things go wrong.

But angry shouting is something we must do too. I am not of course in favour of ill-informed loud mouthing, but I am very much in favour of detailed, forensic and ruthless exposure of
failures in policy delivery and design. The grasp of detail of the legislative and regulatory framework which CPAG is privileged to have available in its welfare rights workers offers the organisation a level of expertise which it is incumbent upon us to use to the full. We can use the expert knowledge of those workers to lobby for change, to press for improvements and we can do that privately; but we can use it publicly too when government is not listening—and increasingly I expect we will find ourselves doing so if we are unable to achieve change by other more persuasive routes. Right now, for instance, CPAG is threatening to take the UK Government to court to challenge the legality of the way in with overpayments of tax credits are recovered—and already the threat of legal action has apparently produced some concessions. So so-called legal test cases in conjunction with policy and lobbying will continue to form a part of our strategy, and one that might well increase.

Having the evidence, drawing on our knowledge and expertise to identify the problems in the system and raise these challenges, plainly matters—but in a wider context too, the demands on us to find and use the evid to support our lobbying activity are changing and increasing. The Blair administration has been a government which has made much of evid-based policymaking. So we have to respond in kind. But where to find that evidence? CPAG has close relationships with the academic and research communities, and we draw heavily on their research evidence to argue our policy case. But credibility is increasingly dependent too on drawing on the lived experience of those in poverty; and participatory research methods which give voice to those experiencing poverty are of particular interest. CPAG has begun to experiment with undertaking this sort of research in our own right—which is important, I think, to give our lobbying legitimacy and credibility, but a challenge, I have to say, for an organisation whose tradition is rather more elitist and analytical, and one that it is important we learn to get right.

And that leads us further into difficult territory – the way we use the language of poverty and disadvantage. Anti-poverty campaigners and political leaders have been reluctant to use the ‘P’ word (poverty), and ambivalent about the ‘C’ word (children). In rich countries it is hard to get the public to believe that such a thing as poverty exists. Too readily it is seen as being about a poor set of lifestyle choices, poor parenting, and that if it’s just about kids going without a few so-called luxuries (though in our better off families, a computer for the kids to do their homework or a cellphone to stay in touch with them when they are out certainly are not seen as luxuries) then what have we got to worry about? Even the poor don’t choose to describe themselves as living in poverty, are often just as critical as the rest of the population of those they describe as ‘scrounging’ on benefits—and opinion leaders are all too often willing to jump on that particular bandwagon and blame the undeserving poor as the authors of their own misfortune. And perhaps it’s in an attempt to move off this blame-ridden territory that the UK government has therefore couched its political agenda in terms of child poverty—children as the innocent victims—insofar as they are talking about it at all. But I do think there has been disadvantage as well as political gain in a focus on poverty among children, because of course poor children have poor parents, and the consequence of a language that focuses on children is to miss or misdirect some of the policy solutions that can fully tackle family poverty.

So perhaps we have to think now about how to broaden our agenda to make it more inclusive, and to find ways to overcome the concept of blame. Policy in relation to tackling income poverty—welfare benefits, labour market policies, tax credits—these lie firmly with central government, and that’s where traditionally CPAG has focused its attention and will continue to do so. But I guess we need perhaps to widen our attack on child poverty, and to look at
what more we should be doing—especially with local and regional government—to influence the delivery of public services and how these reach the poorest children.

In the UK, we now have devolved regional governments for Scotland, Wales and London, and at local government level—at the level of county and municipal government—there are new responsibilities for delivering services for children and families which have the potential to impact very significantly on our poorest families. For me, this is becoming increasingly interesting, as we see a growing political interest in the language of improving children’s future life chances, and a gaining political view that money is important but that poverty is not just about cash. This particular policy interest in life chances presents, I think, a new and quite demanding challenge for CPAG. It is leading the debate to move off poverty and increasingly on to inequality as the root of damage to children’s well-being in childhood and achievement of their full potential as adults. In CPAG, which is especially concerned about income poverty, it’s important that we don’t fall out of the debate as it moves on to this new territory, leaving us out of fashion and behind. We need to keep a focus on policy to achieve adequate incomes, and I think we can readily couch that within the terms of the inequality debate, but I guess increasingly we have to ack and participate in the debate about access to good quality public services too.

Luckily I think there are some good opportunities for us to ensure that we make clear links between the income poverty and public service agendas. The Children Act which we’ve just had go through Parliament and which imposes new duties on local government for the way they provide children’s services offers us a new route for dialogue and for influencing policy to improve the lot of our poorest children. And the devolved governments for Scotland and Wales can be—and sometimes already are—a beacon of good practice which we can hold up to the national government. For example, the Scottish Executive is looking very seriously now at extending access to free school meals to many more children—something CPAG would strongly advocate, and if we can see it’s being done in Scotland, we can quickly press for it to happen right across the UK too.

So I have been interested in the political balancing act that goes on here in Australia between the federal government and the individual states. I guess here is something we can learn from you about the playing off of national and regional government, something about the challenges, and about the opportunities too. In the UK, thinking is at a very early stage in this area, but I think there is an increasing opportunity and need for us to connect the agendas of income poverty with children’s services, education, health and so on, and with local economic and regeneration strategies, to take a more multifaceted view of poverty, and to do so with a wider collective of government agencies than we have perhaps traditionally engaged with in the past.

At the other end of the spectrum I think we need to think globally too. As I said earlier in this lecture, many countries where we might traditionally form our relationships and comparisons, and where policy solutions might be looked for, have governments which have been moving off to the right. So today the UK remains a bit of an outrider, and I wonder whether that gives us an opportunity to create in the UK government a greater sense of pride in their child poverty target and the policies they have brought in to achieve it, and to encourage them in an ambition to be seen as world-leaders in committing to tackling child poverty, to want to be an exemplar to other countries and to engender a determination to do more. That could work well for us in Britain in keeping child poverty high on our domestic agenda, and hopefully it might
be of some help to you too in those countries where it’s less centre stage on your domestic policy programme.

I do realise that may sound a faint hope to you here in Australia given the complexion and priorities of your federal government and its direction of travel right now. But in the UK, what has been interesting has been to see this played out this year in the way in which the global poverty agenda has been advanced. The Make Poverty History movement, focused on poverty in the developing world, and on measures to tackle it through trade justice, debt forgiveness and aid, has been huge in the UK over the past 12 months and has attracted political leadership and public support on a scale that I think we simply only dream of in relation to poverty at home. Much was made by our political leaders—Blair and Brown—of the role of the UK in leading the G8 to do more to tackle global poverty. It has repeatedly been claimed that where Britain led, other developed countries followed. So I wonder whether a similar sense of pride could be engendered in the British government being seen as world leaders, the guys to beat, in tackling domestic poverty too.

But how to do that goes ultimately I think to perhaps the biggest and most interesting challenge of all for those of us working in the anti-poverty field, and that’s about the role of public opinion, generating a sense of public outrage, that means that no government can afford to ignore domestic child poverty, the public simply won’t stand for it, and that any government of whatever colour will have to make sure that child poverty lies at the very heart of its domestic agenda. We—and I suspect you—are light years away from achieving that, from winning the hearts and minds of the public for an end to child poverty at home. But I think we do have—from the success of Make Poverty History, and from other research that we’ve seen in just the last few months—a sense of how perhaps it could be begun.

Earlier this year, the Fabian Society,—a left wing think tank affiliated to the UK Labour Party, published the findings of its Commission on child poverty and life chances. The Commission had interviewed members of the public from across the upper middle end of the income spectrum, and asked them whether they thought child poverty existed in Britain and what they thought were its causes and cures. At first sight the findings were depressing: the interviewees simply refused to believe that poverty existed in the UK at all, saw it simply as meaning that kids couldn’t afford the latest iPod or Nike trainers—and where they did acknowledge it existed, they blamed it on poor parenting, on feckless mums and dads who fritter away the family budget on booze and fags, rather than blaming structural causes of poverty to which we need to find structural solutions.

But while those findings were, if not surprising, certainly discouraging, what was more hopeful was that when the interviewees were presented with the information that it was, for example, possible to be in paid work and still find yourself below the poverty line (around half of all children growing up poor in the UK are doing so in households where at least one adult is in paid work), or presented with a picture of what poverty actually meant in practice for children who experienced it, they began to change their views. And especially when faced with the information that poor families might not be able to afford what they rightly regarded as essential for their own children—swimming lessons, birthday parties, things they saw as the essentials of a happy and fulfilling childhood just as much as material items—they became angry, horrified, and determined that something could be done. Many indicated they would be prepared to see an increase in their personal tax bills to tackle this injustice—something that no British politician of the left or right will even contemplate suggesting today.
Now of course we shouldn’t be starry eyed about the findings of a focus group who had been very specifically directed to give the matter their attention, and we shouldn’t assume that winning over public opinion is something that is there for the taking as a result. Indeed, just before I left London last Friday, I was looking at some even more recent research commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which painted a gloomy picture of how entrenched people’s attitudes to poverty actually were and how hard in practice, and even when they became persuaded of and felt a sense of concern at the existence and exp of poverty, how hard it could be to sustain their support for the policies necessary to tackle it, and really to change their world view. But we should, I think, draw hope that attitudes can, with the right information, at the very least be disturbed. So what are we—CPAG, you here in Australia, but also our political leaders—able and going to do about that? Should we, can we shape public opinion to create a Make Poverty History movement for poverty at home?

In Britain we have really been struggling within the not-for-profit sector to do this. I guess we lack some confidence in the sellability of our message when push comes to shove—that faced with the reality of tackling child poverty in the rough next door housing estate, with the kids in their hooded jackets on the wasteland after dark, or the family that you’d rather not live next door to, perhaps the public can quickly come to feel less enthusiastic than about tackling poverty safely far from home in the devg world. And this might explain too why the UK government has been so coy about their child poverty ambitions, why ministers who ought to be shouting about it from the rooftops would rather do good by stealth.

But nonetheless in the not-for-profit sector in Britain we have been working over a number of years now to build an alliance, to mount a campaign to raise public awareness of child poverty and bring the public onside to end it. It has not, believe me, proved at all easy. Organisations have been reluctant to weaken their individual profiles and lobbying positions to join in an alliance in which their own identities may be lost.

But we do at least have now a coalition of organisations under the banner of End Child Poverty which brings together the voluntary sector, the big children’s charities, local government, the trade unions, faith groups, community organisations, and even some of the business community to start to try to do this. This April the End Child Poverty coalition will move in with CPAG and start to plan and implement a series of high-profile public events around which we hope all our organisations’ lobbying and campaigning activity can focus and coalesce. I have to say there is not inconsiderable scepticism—including among some of our own member organisations—that we can pull this off. But I also feel most strongly that it is incumbent on us at least to try—to make the effort to build a sense of public concern and determination to end child poverty once and for all.

So to sum up, I guess no-one in CPAG in 1965 thought we’d still be fighting these battles 40 years later. And today the game is still a very challenging one. But we have learnt a lot about how to play it, even if it’s not yet won. We have learnt to combine insider lobbying with public noise. We have learnt to build broad alliances, to keep the dialogue going, and to play the long game. We have learnt not in any way to compromise our values but to be able to negotiate and wheeler-deal to get the best possible result for our long-term goal.

Most importantly, the child poverty target has been an immensely helpful framework for us in the UK to ensure that child poverty stays on the political agenda, that politicians cannot take their eye off the ball. For us in the UK it is essential that we do not allow that target to be lost
or weakened, and that we use it to push for policy improvements that truly bring about an end to child poverty in line with our government’s pledge. But more generally, and for you here in Australia without that target, I think we know too that only a range of approaches, a cocktail of strategies, and a determination to keep on pressing for them can ensure long-term policy improvement, and that we should always remember that nothing remains static and that it is not safe to assume that policy gains are here to stay.

And for me that means that the greatest challenge still outstanding is to bring about the sort of fundamental shift in societal attitudes and values that, however we may feel about her legacy, I do think Mrs Thatcher achieved in terms of restructuring the UK economy and the labour market—to bring about a groundbreaking shift in the org and values of our society in relation to the elimination of child poverty—a determination, a sense of outrage, something that future governments have to take as a given, cannot reverse, and that public opinion takes as a given too. Only if we do that can we truly hope to eradicate child poverty for ever.

Let’s of course not fool ourselves that that will be easy. Political winds can blow the most carefully thought-out strategy off course. The messages about the extent of public support for such a cause are, at best, mixed. But in the end, whatever political world we inhabit, whatever the domestic policy agenda, I believe we must face that challenge now, in every one of the world’s richest countries, to ensure that ours is the generation that ends child poverty for ever. As Tony Blair has said, that is not an easy challenge, but it is something that can be done. So this is the battle we must now fight; and for the sake of all our children, it is one we must win.

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