The politics of disadvantage:
New Labour, social exclusion
and post-crash Britain

By Clare McNeil,
IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research)
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Executive Summary

Just days after the 1997 election, Tony Blair made a speech on the Aylesbury Estate in South London, promising ‘there will be no forgotten people in the Britain I want to build’. The New Labour government set out an ambitious vision to end social exclusion as part of a project to re-build Britain as ‘one nation’, in which each citizen ‘has a stake’. New Labour’s social exclusion agenda was a bold attempt to deal with chronic levels of social disadvantage and inequality in the UK in the mid-90’s. It aimed to achieve this not simply by redistribution through the tax and benefits system, but by reforming government, improving public services and targeting support for the most disadvantaged.

Important progress was made in reducing social disadvantage, which, this report argues, should be built on. However, given the substantial resources invested and the health of the economy over the period, reform under the social exclusion agenda did not extend far enough beyond Whitehall into public services or local government and the agenda never made full use of peoples’ potential. There has been no real attempt to learn from the decade-long social exclusion agenda for politics, yet it has vital lessons to offer each of the main political parties. In this paper we review the impact of the social exclusion agenda, focusing in particular on the implications for future policy on ‘multiple disadvantage’.

Our findings are based on almost 30 interviews with those involved in efforts to tackle social exclusion over the past fifteen years, carried out over several months in 2012. Interviewees included service users who received support during this time, a number of former ministers and senior politicians in the New Labour government, political advisers and policymakers under Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and under the Coalition government, the former heads of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) and Social Exclusion Taskforce, academics, civil servants, local government officials and civic society representatives. We explore, in particular, how efforts at social reform are heavily shaped by the ‘politics of disadvantage’, a term which we use to describe the ‘democratic deficit’ facing the most disadvantaged in society.1

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Introduction

What causes politicians to risk their political capital on attempts to improve the lives of the most disadvantaged members of society? How do they square such action with their wider political philosophy or narrative? How do they sell this to an often sceptical, sometimes antagonistic public? And is the resulting action ultimately in the best interests of those it aims to support?

These questions are more sensitive and urgent than ever. The well-being of people who face severe and multiple disadvantage depends critically on support provided by publicly funded services. These services in turn are determined by the nature and tone of political discourse. As spending cuts deepen, national and local politicians are having to make decisions that may literally prove a matter of life and death for people who have little or no stake in the political process.

The economic context may be unprecedented, but many of the factors that currently shape the politics of disadvantage are familiar:

- public and media concerns about social fabric and personal responsibility
- an inevitable focus on a core electorate (the ‘decent hard-working majority’)
- the premium placed on an individual’s economic utility in a globalised economy
- strongly divergent views on how different manifestations of disadvantage should be understood and prioritised

These and other factors helped shape, for good and ill, the social exclusion and social justice agendas of the New Labour and Coalition governments respectively. This report, written by IPPR for LankellyChase Foundation, aims to bring these factors to the surface so that we can understand better their impact on the development and delivery of policy. It also appraises what the basis for a new politics of disadvantage might be.

Given the grim reality now facing the most disadvantaged, an analysis of political discourse may seem an odd priority. What this report shows, however, is that political case for action remains complex, the terms of the debate are not wholly constructive, and the means of delivery are especially contested. The imperative to lead this agenda with clear-sighted political ideas and argument is greater than ever. The lessons of the recent past need to be learnt and new approaches developed that respond to a radically transformed environment.

Otherwise, the undeniable progress made in the last 15 years on social disadvantage risks going into rapid reverse.

Julian Cerner
Chief Executive, LankellyChase Foundation

Foreword

By now we were meant to have reached a secure settlement for people on the margins of society. The social exclusion agenda was intended to be much more than a series of initiatives. It was envisaged as a fundamental reframing of political discourse whose objective was nothing less than to ‘end social exclusion’ through public service reform. While many improvements followed of which we can still be proud, recent spending cuts have revealed the extent to which progress relied on the supply of new money. Fifteen years since the launch of the social exclusion agenda, our ability to support our most disadvantaged citizens remains highly contingent.

1 "Prime Minister Tony Blair speech ‘Bringing Britain Together’, South London, 8 December 1997 (Blair 1997).

2 Multiple disadvantage is defined as the experience of two or more of the following mental illnesses; severe personality disorders; drug dependence; homelessness; learning disability; and adult neurological disorders. These problems can co-occur and compound each other (Duncan M with Corner J 2012).

3 People who experience multiple disadvantages are heavily shaped by the ‘politics of disadvantage’, a term which we use to describe the ‘democratic deficit’ facing the most disadvantaged in society.

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Key findings

Social exclusion agenda made progress in reducing social disadvantage but was overly reliant on the levers of state.

The biggest achievements of the social exclusion agenda were those where government could use the levers of state to bring about change, for example, in redistributing wealth through the tax and benefits system to reduce the number of children living in poverty, using conditionality in the welfare system to increase numbers of people in work or concentrating resources to meet one-off targets, such as teenage pregnancies or numbers of people sleeping rough. Problems that required a more nuanced approach such as responding to complex needs that cut across a number of services, tackling ethnic inequalities and increasing the voice and power of the most disadvantaged, the agenda had less success.

The agenda relied on marginal spending, leaving mainstream public services largely unchanged.

Initiatives and reform often lacked institutional and local roots. In areas such as urban regeneration, health, social services and education, marginal spending secured by the SEU had limited influence on ‘mainstream spend’. This was particularly the case in relation to area-based regeneration. A lack of lasting reform was seen in the ‘limited evidence of the re-aligning and re-allocating of mainstream budgets’ (York Consulting 2008) as a result of initiatives that were funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. A failure to successfully ‘mainstream’ these efforts was also attributed to the influence of New Public Management (NPM) practices that encouraged service users to ‘become active consumers of services, rather than engaged participants, often bypassing existing informal networks and inhibiting a sense of local ownership. The economic crash and resulting collapse in public finances has exposed this reliance on marginal spending as a key weakness in New Labour’s approach to tackling social exclusion.

In an era of heavily reduced public spending, government will not be able to ‘coax and cajole’ departments into mainstreaming social exclusion objectives through one-off investments, such as the £1.71bn New Deal for Communities (NDC), cross-cutting units or large programmes to improve integration between systems, such as the Drugs Intervention Programme.

Services and systems struggled to deal with complex social problems.

Service users from disadvantaged groups continued to experience a lack of timely engagement, poor or infrequent contact with professionals and were given little information about the planning of their support. Because of the complexity of their problems and the difficulties they often face in forming trusting relationships, people with multiple disadvantages need highly relational, intensive contact. Yet the ‘command and control’ systems of accountability under New Labour, with centrally determined targets dictating local action, all too often restricted professional autonomy, diverted attention away from the frontline and created resentment among service users. Services all too often ‘met the target but missed the point’ as the complex, personal achievements of building successful relationships and a sense of purpose in life were often squeezed out by systems that favoured ‘hard’ outcomes. This is not straightforward, however, as these systems of accountability were also seen to have tackled poor performance and to have led to greater allocation of resources to tackle disadvantage through national indicators such as public service agreements.

The agenda did not significantly shift the experience of disempowerment among the most disadvantaged.

The sense of disempowerment that is a constant feature of life for the most disadvantaged was not sufficiently challenged under the social exclusion agenda. New Labour offered greater opportunity and improved public services in return for which individuals were asked to show greater personal and social responsibility. But this led to a politics of exclusion that was narrowly focused on obligation. A weak concept of inclusion beyond the labour market meant there was not a strong enough platform for challenging prejudice and stigma, under-representation and marginalised groups’ experiences of unresponsive services.

One review found that targets and requirements for ‘hard’ outcomes in social and political activities had little impact, and many low-income families felt they had ‘no influence at all’ (Stuart and Hills 2005). Over time, the politics of the social exclusion agenda became more concerned with bearing down on social dysfunction in pursuing the Respect agenda to tackle anti-social behaviour, rather than acting on social inclusion. Prospects for the most severely excluded, including those at the bottom of the income distribution scale, did not significantly change over the period.

In order to marshal these findings and reflect on the New Labour period, we draw on three influential forms of political thought. Egalitarian thinking set out a way forward in tackling social disadvantage. It prioritises material and distributinal concerns, long central to social democratic politics. Liberal political thought combines a commitment to individual rights with a strong tradition of civic engagement; Relational thinking advocates a politics built around everyday experience and the centrality of human relationships to the good life and was central to the collection of ideas referred to as ‘Blue Labour’. The three political frameworks suggest different ways forward for various actors including political parties, policymakers and civil society, to respond.

Aspects of each of these schools of thought can help set out a way forward in tackling social disadvantage. Egalitarian thinking can provide a vision for greater equality and universal support, while liberal means of individual and community empowerment can help realise this vision. Relational thinking can help confront the weaknesses of both state and market in relation to tackling disadvantage, but this will require a shift away from the New Labour traits of ‘control and consensus’ towards greater unpredictability and a willingness to contest concentrations of power.
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Conclusions and ways forward

The focus on the marginal pound was a mistake. It created the impression that you wouldn’t do anything about social exclusion unless you got paid for it – you can use extra spend to capitalise or incentivise but your mainstream money is always going to be larger than your marginal money."

The story of social exclusion told under New Labour, and now of ‘social justice’ under the Coalition government, is that insecurity, isolation and a systematic lack of opportunity are the preserve of a small minority marginalized from mainstream society. This story is not true of Britain after the financial crisis, if indeed it ever was. Exclusion and inequality are no longer seen as marginal issues, following the longest decline in living standards since the 1920s and with long-term unemployment back at levels not seen since the mid-90s.

Under Blair, the social exclusion agenda understood that the most excluded need different forms of support than the post-war settlement of welfare state plus universal public services could provide. But its mistake was to paint a picture of 2.5 per cent of the population as fundamentally different to the rest because of disaffection, social dysfunction or lack of opportunity. This suggests that the problems of alienation, isolation and poor life chances are confined to a tiny minority, rather than simply hitting this group harder and often in combination.

The Coalition’s ‘Social Justice’ strategy also focuses on a narrow group facing entrenched social disadvantage and poverty, the causes of which are attributed to family breakdown, substance misuse, crime, debt and welfare dependency, while neglecting wider economic inequalities such as in-work poverty and structural unemployment. The lesson of the past decade or so is that both approaches lead to a settlement for the most disadvantaged that is residualised and unstable.

In today’s Britain, a more resilient settlement for tackling social disadvantage will require finding common ground with majority concerns and creating the conditions needed for greater inclusion by going further to restore power and voice to disadvantaged groups. It will mean providing highly relational and targeted support for those who need it most, but also pursuing long-term, institutional reforms to make mainstream services more responsive, providing the ultimate test bed for a more ‘relational state’.

For this to secure popular consent, it needs to form part of a bigger argument for social renewal, linking with common concerns like better solutions to mental health problems and social isolation; more responsive public services that listen early and often, and tackling pervasive inequalities in the employment and housing markets. This could provide the basis of a transformative agenda for tackling social disadvantage in the next decade. Some starting points for this are set out here.

Politics

Rather than a narrow, individualistic model of economic inclusion, equal value should be placed on wider aspects of citizenship, such as contribution to civic life, personal flourishing and strong social relationships. In contrast to the politics of inclusion under New Labour and the Coalition, this would be based on a conviction that empowerment is a better route to social responsibility than obligation alone. For this to succeed, however, it has to be part of a politics of the common good. While responsibility was demanded of the most excluded under New Labour, voluntary exclusion at the top of society was too often ignored. If more is to be expected of those facing disadvantage, a sense of responsibility has to stretch across the whole of society and not just the most marginalised.

Priorities

An agenda for social renewal would prioritise areas in which there continues to be serious failure, such as multiple disadvantage, which remains a minority interest in any government department and where high quality frontline services are still lacking. To this end, a new agenda should seek to protect services like the homelessness sector and drug and alcohol treatment as well as intensive, one-to-one support for the most disadvantaged individuals and families.

This review also concludes that public spending should be maintained and, where possible, expanded in areas such as mental health support and early intervention, particularly early years and childhood/young adulthood, which have wide reach and where changes would also improve prospects for the most disadvantaged.

Spending in these areas would be sustained by doing less on issues where policy has proven less successful, for example, in the youth justice system, where interventions have struggled to address the complex economic and social factors that are the cause of so much youth offending; or on area-based regeneration where macroeconomic policy is more likely to have a long-term impact than discretionary spending by government.

Social partners

A new agenda should be based on a different understanding of state power, one which doesn’t attempt to drive social change simply through a service delivery mechanism but also sees it as an exercise in partnership and coalition building. Civil Society organisations such as charities, social enterprises and trade unions will play a vital role in challenging existing power structures and forms of prejudice to create a level playing field for the most disadvantaged, whether in relation to challenging public opinion, local hierarchies, unresponsive public services or undemocratic forms of accountability or governance.

Building common alliances to link disadvantage with majority concerns.

Those advocating on behalf of people facing multiple disadvantage need to identify long term projects where there are grounds to build common cause with broader coalitions to link up with majority concerns. Identifying these shared concerns becomes more important as competition for scarce resources increases and public attitudes towards the least advantaged harden. A potential area for this could be a stronger settlement for the most disadvantaged on mental health (see below). A diverse coalition of political and advocacy groups and service users joining together with the growing constituency of support calling for more talking therapies will be key to establishing this as a mainstream political goal.10,11

A stronger platform to defend the humanity and dignity of the most disadvantaged.

A stronger platform to defend the humanity and dignity of the most disadvantaged is increasingly needed to challenge the hardening of public attitudes towards the least advantaged, which is creating space for more divisive policies, for example on welfare reform.12 A lack of external political pressure from charities and trade unions was highlighted by some in this report as one of the reasons why less radical policy progress could be made under the social exclusion agenda. ‘Invest to save’ arguments pursued by many charities can risk falling on deaf ears in government.13 Charities working with the most disadvantaged could play a powerful role in the public debate by uniting around a campaigning
aim of improving public perception and understanding of the lives their clients lead, with the framing of their experiences led by service users themselves.

Statecraft

Rather than being centrally determined, priorities should be set according to local need, with the role of central government being to define key challenges. Instead of driving social change through target-led systems and centralised services, the goal should be to decentralise services and introduce more subjective approaches to accountability.

New approaches to accountability.

More meaningful systems of accountability should be introduced over models such as payment-by-results (PBR) or ‘black box’ commissioning for the most disadvantaged groups. PBR may have a role for some groups, such as those closest to the labour market in welfare to work, but for those with the most complex needs, PBR provides little incentive for the intensive, long-term support required. ‘Black box’ commissioning can also lead to loss of insight and accountability in relation to the hardest to help groups. Beyond these practical concerns, both systems set objective outcomes with little or no input from the service user. A different approach for those most in need of highly relational support would place equal value on process as on outcomes. The focus on process as well as outcome creates space for professionals to prioritise building relationships with the families. Families having a say in the outcomes they pay to achieve gives a sense of ownership, boosting their capability and creating deeper and more sustainable change (see http://www.participle.net/Projects/view/S107/).

Reconciling localism and entitlement.

Linking community priorities more closely with social exclusion policy could create more integrated services and target resources more effectively. However, greater localism also means tough choices, such as not reversing the recent withdrawal of ring-fenced funding in a number of areas, which places some disadvantaged groups at risk of losing out on support. In the past, government has sought to promote equality of rights for the most disadvantaged through legislation or statutory requirements on local authorities, such as equality duties. In a more localist future, new ways need to be found to improve prospects for marginalised groups. Some have argued for greater public scrutiny or voluntary agreements on entitlements or service guarantees. Others suggest that greater equality is more likely to result from communities having the freedom to negotiate better solutions to local problems. Understanding what entitlement for the most disadvantaged will look like in a more localist future urgently needs to be debated.

Stronger organisation of service users to challenge institutions.

Crucial to balancing localism and entitlement will be deciding how the most disadvantaged gain power and voice alongside those around them in the community. A priority for this should be stronger organisation of service users to challenge institutions. On some issues such as mental health, service users are well represented and organised through groups holding institutions and services to account and linking into commissioning priorities. But for other issues such as substance misuse or long-term unemployment, service-user groups are not organised on the same scale and few groups have direct links to commissioning and formal processes of decision-making, representation and review. Changes in the way services are commissioned could help to set this as a priority for public and voluntary sector services.

For more responsive services for the most disadvantaged, institutional and systems reforms should be prioritised over small-scale initiatives, mainstream over marginal spending, and preventative reach over crisis responses. Reform should include freeing up for resources for more relational support through greater automation and/or transactional responses for those who don’t require personalised support. As a starting point, changes in the mental health system and social services/criminal justice system provide examples for this.

Stronger settlement for those socially excluded by mental health issues.

One in six of the population now experience mental health problems and a mental health condition is often a core and exacerbating factor in multiple disadvantage. For example those in the criminal justice system under New Labour were missed. But the approach had varying levels of success. For example nearly all of the targets on education and training, mental health, substance misuse, and housing provision in the youth justice system under New Labour were missed. Challenging this balance could help determine whether the funding going into these services could have better preventative reach. In the same vein there is a strong case for a review of the core functions of social services and the extent to which it can provide highly personalised interventions where necessary, while working to change organisational cultures by building professionals’ skills and knowledge in relation to multiple disadvantage. For example those in the criminal justice system just over 70 per cent of whom have a mental disorder compared to just under 5 per cent of the general population) and in homelessness services (almost 40 per cent of London’s rough sleepers are estimated to have a mental health problem). Young people with mental health problems should also be a priority due to high levels of unmet need. At a time when the NHS needs to make savings of around £20bn, the associated benefits (for example mental illness is the cause of half of all incapacity benefit claims) mean mental health should be strongly considered for additional spending and at the very least it’s budget should not be cut.

A better balance between enforcement and prevention.

While preventive services such as social services and probation have become more narrowly focused on the management of risk and enforcement, services with an enforcement remit like the youth justice system and policing have taken on more social support functions. This reflects the enforcement-led response to tackling many social problems under New Labour, and which has not significantly altered under the Coalition. But the approach had varying levels of success. For example nearly all of the targets on education and training, mental health, substance misuse, and housing provision in the youth justice system under New Labour were missed.

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Introduction

“I grew up between East London with my Mum and sister, then later between there and North London. The kind of life I led was basically based around crime and violence – I was frustrated and I couldn’t express myself.

I was street homeless a few times where I scored the rent money and had to leave. I did quite a lot of prison time – not serious time, a lot of six months stints – I’d say I was in eight or nine times. I always had a trade; even when I was in a chaotic lifestyle I was in and out of employment.

All the focus was on the drugs and coming off drugs, yet drugs were helping my mental stability. It was only later on in life that it was actually recognised that there might be something other than substance abuse.

I didn’t expect to be diagnosed with a mental health issue but it was actually a relief – having someone who knew what was going on in my mind and why I was acting the way I was acting. I really do think if that was recognised earlier on and I was able to get that sort of help earlier on I may not have wasted thirty years of my life.”

Like most of us, Tim defies easy categorisation. Though he was in and out of work and his work was often seasonal, he never had difficulty in finding work. He says his life was based around ‘crime and violence’. He used drugs, including crack cocaine, for over thirty years, resulting in frequent stays in prison and time in hostels and insecure accommodation.

Despite being in drug rehabilitation at least three or four times, it was after he was sectioned for his mental health problems that Tim found the strength to change his life. Since his mental health problems were diagnosed, he now feels he was using drugs to cope with depression, and his anger and violence were a result of his difficulty in understanding his own behaviour. He is volunteering at a drug treatment centre and says helping people in a similar situation has given him a purpose that helps him stay clean. His challenge now is to find a job and gain the trust of employers to hire him, even though he has an extensive criminal record.

Because of his problems and experiences, Tim needed more than the support of friends and family to understand what was contributing to his difficulties and to change his life. As a result, he and many others in similar circumstances are heavily reliant on the public and voluntary services they encounter. Their experiences of these services will largely be based on the workers and professionals they come into contact with. But this, in turn, is influenced by how services are funded and commissioned, the policy frameworks that set the context for this, the priorities that are set at the level of local and central government and the political concerns that influence this. Ultimately, then, the lives of people like Tim are shaped – not solely, but fundamentally – by the politics governing the provision of the support they seek.

This paper is an account of the views of some of those involved in this politics over the past fifteen years, including people like Tim who received support, the politicians involved in setting the agenda for it, the policymakers involved in devising it, the academics who influenced it, and the civil servants, local government officials and civil society who delivered it. The aim is for the lessons learnt and knowledge gained to shape a better ‘politics of disadvantage’ for the future.

It is difficult to estimate the number of people who, like Tim, have experienced severe and multiple disadvantages like homelessness, mental health problems or substance misuse, because they are in part defined by their lack of contact with services and are often missed in official surveys. This has been estimated at around 800,000 or 1.7 per cent of the population.16 On a wider definition of multiple disadvantage, around 5.3 million people, or 11 per cent of adults in the UK, are estimated to experience, at any one time, three or more of six areas of disadvantage (in relation to education, health, employment, income, social support, housing and local environment).17 However these numbers are in constant flux as people move in and out of disadvantage for different reasons and these

Conclusion

Our call in this paper is for a new agenda for preventing social disadvantage, which is part of a bigger argument for social renewal and which connects with majority concerns. It should be based on a different understanding of state power, one which doesn’t attempt to drive social change simply through a service delivery mechanism but which also sees it as an exercise in partnership and coalition building. It should take a rigorous and creative approach to designing public services for greater productivity and preventative reach, and it should advocate localism and more meaningful systems of accountability. Most importantly, it would be based on an ethic that sees empowerment as a better route to social responsibility than obligation alone, and would demand this responsibility from all parts of society, not just the most vulnerable.

See http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/

Still serve its original purpose [the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being].19

There is a hunger for something different. Stop telling us that everything is wrong and that we can punish people or measure people in this way... We should talk about the need for change if the government of the day spoke in this way... We should talk about the need for that we can punish people or measure people not just the most vulnerable. Demand this responsibility from all parts of society, responsibility than obligation alone, and would see empowerment as a better route to social preventative reach, and it should advocate localism and more meaningful systems of accountability. It should take a rigorous and creative approach to designing public services for greater productivity and preventative reach, and it should advocate localism and more meaningful systems of accountability. Most importantly, it would be based on an ethic that sees empowerment as a better route to social responsibility than obligation alone, and would demand this responsibility from all parts of society, not just the most vulnerable.

See http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/
official figures do not include many people who are homeless, in prison or hospital, or who are refugees – in other words, the most socially excluded.

There are signs that some aspects of multiple disadvantage are worsening as a result of the current recession and economic instability. In 2011, there was a 14 per cent increase in the number of households accepted as homeless by local authorities, the largest increase for nine years (CLG 2012). The number of rough sleepers rose in 2011, up by 23 percentage points on 2010 (ONS 2012). The number of evictions by private landlords in the past 12 months is 70 per cent higher than three years ago. Unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, which is currently at its highest rate since 1996, is a risk factor for social exclusion, along with being economically inactive and having few or no qualifications (SETF 2009).

As the economic crisis has contributed to the problem of multiple disadvantage, it has also made public spending on the problem increasingly unsustainable. The cost to public services of a family with five or more disadvantages has been put at between £55,000 and £115,000 per year (HM Treasury 2007), the cost of an ‘average’ adult with multiple needs put at £23,000 per year, and for the most severely disadvantaged, the cost of one individual to public services can be as high as £408,000 over several years in direct costs alone (MEAM 2009). Despite these high costs, public service reform has struggled to prioritise multiple disadvantage, and even where it has, progress has been modest.

In this paper we explore to what extent this is the result of what we refer to as the ‘politics of disadvantage’. We do so largely through examining the political discourse and policymaking of the last fifteen years, with a particular focus on the social exclusion agenda of the previous government. This is both a case study of the politics of disadvantage and a means to of evaluating how progressive politics and policymaking need to change to allow for a more meaningful approach to tackling multiple disadvantage in the future.

We have two key objectives: to expose the role of political discourse in shaping the policymaking environment for the most disadvantaged over the past fifteen years, and to synthesise what we can learn from this, along with key lessons on statecraft and policymaking that can help to tackle these problems in the future more effectively. We address the broad issues of social exclusion and multiple disadvantage, with a particular focus on ‘severe and multiple disadvantage’. People experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage face a systemic difficulty in that services working in silos are often geared to address ‘depth’ but not ‘breadth’ of need. We start from the normative position that in a progressive society, it is the duty of government to help create the conditions for even its most vulnerable and marginalised citizens to prosper, and that there are clear benefits in terms of collective well-being, democratic life and economic prosperity in doing so.

Our findings are based on almost 30 semi-structured interviews, carried out over several months in 2012, with people involved in efforts to tackle social exclusion over the past fifteen years. Interviewees included people like Tim who received support during this time, a number of former ministers and senior politicians in the New Labour government, political advisers and policymakers under Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and under the Coalition government, the former heads of the SEU and Social Exclusion Taskforce, academics, civil servants, local government officials and civil society representatives. The findings are also informed by a review of key aspects of political discourse, including political texts such as speeches, policy strategy documents and evaluations.

In order to critique our findings and as an organising principle for reconceptualising the agenda, we draw on three political perspectives that shape the way we think about governing and policymaking today. They provide an organising principle for the research and are drawn upon as guides rather than dogmatic positions. Egalitarian thinking prioritises material and distributional concerns, long central to social democratic politics. Liberal political thought combines a commitment to individual rights, with a strong tradition of civic reformism. Relational thinking advocates a politics built around everyday experience and the centrality of human relationships to the good life, and was key to the collection of ideas referred to as ‘Blue Labour’. A typology of these different perspectives is set out in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Typology of relational, liberal and egalitarian political perspectives
The mid-1990s, New Labour and social exclusion

The mid-90s was a period shaped by challenging social and economic circumstances. Poverty and inequality were at levels unprecedented in post-war history, long-term unemployment was growing and economic inactivity among men of working age was high [Commission on Social Justice 1994]. A process of deinstitutionalisation in the eighties and nineties had led to a number of highly visible social problems, including the second highest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe (Stewart and Hills 2000). One in four children was living in poverty. Reversing this decline became one of the central challenges for the Labour party, which saw its best opportunity to win power in almost two decades.

The Labour party, in opposition in the mid-1990s, was renewing its approach to social justice, based partly on analysis that its redistributive tax-and-spend policies had sunk its electoral ambitions in the seventies and eighties. Instead, it embraced ‘third way politics’ which emphasised the importance of ‘equality of opportunity’ rather than the more controversial ‘equality of outcome’ (Giddens 1998). This shift also hinged on Labour’s growing acceptance of the need to reconcile economic efficiency and the free market economy with social justice, rejecting nationalisation and public ownership, to support its social democratic programme of strong public services and limited redistribution. On the right, a discourse of a growing ‘socially and morally inferior’ underclass detached from mainstream society, as described by Charles Murray, was gaining influence, leading to a resurgence of belief in individual agency and obligation, and in attaching ‘responsibilities’ to rights (Murray 1984), which was also to influence New Labour’s political programme.

It was against this backdrop that the concept of ‘social exclusion’ emerged in the UK. It was different because it encompassed a range of factors that can shape disadvantage, rather than an exclusive focus on material poverty. As with many influential shifts in policy, the social exclusion agenda began as the result of considerable political energy that had built up, in this case, over 18 years of Conservative government which, according to those on the left, had left a legacy of ‘official silence and bias of policymaking’ in relation to poverty (Oppehjem 1998). This also meant that relatively little was known about how to address poverty and social exclusion, with more attention having been given to analysing the causes and patterns of poverty and disadvantage rather than to developing a framework for possible solutions.

The shift from thinking largely about income poverty to poverty and social exclusion was partly a response to concerns about wider social decay sparked by incidents like the Jamie Bulger murder case in 1993, and problems like truancy and high rates of teenage pregnancy. It represented a shift in moving beyond traditional thinking on the left to embrace new thinking, such as the ‘capabilities’ framework proposed for considering disadvantage by Amartya Sen, and network-based and social capital theories (Christie and Perry [eds] 1997). But social exclusion was also a politically expedient concept, helping to move the Labour party’s public image away from its tax-and-spend past without renouncing redistribution altogether. This was meant to appeal both to Labour’s traditional political constituency and to the middle England voters New Labour was courting.

Following a landslide election victory, the Labour party came to power in 1997 on a promise to repair the social fabric and improve social cohesion. Social exclusion was a central part of this agenda. Tackling social exclusion was given a dedicated unit in the Cabinet Office and had personal support from the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, as well as other senior members of the cabinet. In a speech later that year, Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet Office, Peter Mandelson, set out its vision and goals:

“Our vision is to end social exclusion. Our priority is to redirect and reform social programmes and the welfare state towards that goal. Our strategy is to build a broad-ranging political consensus for action.”

Mandelson 1997

With high ambition, and considerable public goodwill behind it, New Labour embarked on a first year in office in which almost every domestic department was to reframe its agenda around social exclusion through new policies on welfare to work, childcare, turning around failing schools and area-based regeneration in the most deprived areas.
Analysis

There are four key periods into which the social exclusion agenda can be broadly divided: the establishment of the SEU in 1997 to 2001, when it formed part of the Cabinet Office; 2002 to 2005, when the unit moved to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM); 2006–2007, when the SEU was merged with the Prime Ministers Strategy Unit and re-named as the Social Exclusion Taskforce; and 2007–2010, with the Social Exclusion Taskforce under the Brown government. We break the social exclusion agenda down into three key areas to analyse it. In ‘political strategy’ we explore what the wider political objectives of the social exclusion agenda were and how these formed part of a governing strategy. We then ask what the scope of the social exclusion agenda was, how priorities were set and what tools were used in ‘policy’. Finally, in ‘statecraft’ we ask how the levers of state were used to implement the agenda, which institutions and agencies were involved, and how closely this matched with policy intentions.

i. Political strategy

The concepts of ‘Opportunity for all’ and ‘Rights and responsibilities’ were key elements of New Labour’s political programme and underpinned the social exclusion agenda. The goals of social inclusion policy were understood through ‘Opportunity for all’, which placed a strong emphasis on labour market participation along with education and training to improve life chances. Rights and responsibilities framed the social exclusion agenda in its emphasis on conditional cooperation in return for quality support from public services. This integrated a moral element into New Labour’s programme for social inclusion.

Opportunity for all

Through ‘Opportunity for all’, New Labour strived to create ‘equality of opportunity’ and to protect citizens from the advance of globalisation, technological change and deindustrialisation by equipping them with the improved education, skills and support they needed to find work. The premise – that economic volatility could be stabilised through this strategy to create sustainable economic growth – was crucial to New Labour’s vision for social inclusion.

Being in employment or training was the main goal of ‘Opportunity for all’. This was later adopted, along with housing, as the official indicator of social inclusion – ‘a home and a job’ – in 2007. Faith was placed in the mainstream economy as the path out of exclusion for people of working age, as Tony Blair explained:

“The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience.”

[SEU 1997]

In interviews, the key strengths of ‘Opportunity for all’ were cited as its refusal to accept widespread unemployment and its emphasis on education and training, which could do much to improve people’s life chances. But some interviewees intimated that the policy did not go far enough to respond to the underlying structural problems in the labour market:

“Apart from the introduction of minimum wage, it glossed over the fact you can be in work and socially excluded – it’s not a case of you’re either in or you’re out. What about those on low pay, caring for relatives or doing more than one job?”

The assumption that the mainstream economy could provide a route out of exclusion came to look increasingly doubtful over time, particularly as levels of working-age poverty rose:

“The main problem is...that the link between employment and inclusion...has proved not to be a very strong one. We have seen a remarkable increase in employment in Europe and in the UK over the past ten years... yet that hasn’t done anything to significantly reduce poverty rates or rates of multiple disadvantage.”

The ‘home and a job’ focus for policy could also distort priorities, for example leading services to ‘cream’ off those closest to the labour market to meet targets or priorities, while “parking” the most disadvantaged (DWP 2010). Some also argued that it didn’t sufficiently compensate for market failures in housing and employment, particularly in areas with low housing availability and tight labour markets.

At the level of the political rhetoric used to communicate the agenda, ‘Opportunity for all’ was criticised for having too narrow a focus. Though better access to work and training was vital, there was a view that it should have been complemented by other important dimensions of inclusion, such as social interaction and political participation (see Burchardt et al 2002). Instead, what it meant to be socially included appeared to be based on a more transactional approach to citizenship. One interviewee explained:

For example see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/460009.stm
In the government-wide Public Service Agreement (PSA 16) on social exclusion.

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In the government-wide Public Service Agreement (PSA 16) on social exclusion.
The politics of disadvantage: New Labour, social exclusion and post-crash Britain

Rights and responsibilities

The most significant aspect of New Labour’s political strategy in relation to social exclusion policy was the ‘rights and responsibilities’ agenda. This was a key focus of Blair’s rhetoric in opposition (Blair 1995), and became part of Labour’s political strategy in government, forming the basis of its social contract. It aimed to build strong communities founded on reciprocal rights and responsibilities, to cultivate civic virtues like good manners and respect for other people, their privacy and their property.

The emphasis on conditional cooperation captured by ‘Rights and responsibilities’ was supported by most interviewees as an important foundation – even a political necessity – for public services:

“Equality of opportunity remained an elusive concept. The premise that economic volatility could be stabilised by supply-side policies like education and skills policy was exposed after the 2008 financial crash, and it became clear that policies put in place had not shifted the UK’s low-wage/low-skill equilibrium, to provide greater opportunities for social inclusion.”

Roughs and responsibilities

The balance between rights and responsibilities was viewed as fairly even during the early period of the social exclusion agenda, with ‘responsibility’ promoted through greater conditionality in the welfare system and ‘rights’ through more programmes aimed at improving services and outcomes in the most disadvantaged areas, such as the NDC. But after the 2005 election, during which anti-social behaviour emerged as a key voter concern, there was a change in tone in the presentation of policy and the creation of the Respect Unit to tackle anti-social behaviour. Some interviewees saw this as an attempt to deliver on voter concerns, particularly for those living in deprived communities, but others saw it as a slide into a more authoritarian, politics which also saw the prison population rise by almost 20,000 over the decade from 2000 (HoC Library 2012).

Decisions were made to position certain policies such as the Family Intervention Projects (FIPs), or Family Nurse Partnerships (FNP) which emerged from the Respect Unit and SEU, as being more about responsibilities or ‘control’ than rights or ‘care’:

“[Opportunity for all] was quite... ‘I’ll do this for you but only if you do that for me...’ [we need] to move away from a political narrative that just sees us as bits of the GDP and [focuses on] how we can produce more GDP – whether we get grades A-C or some kind of ‘M’job’. In order for our nation to flourish and for people to flourish, we need a much broader understanding of what we need to provide people with.”

Several interviewees spoke of the complex challenges that went beyond a ‘home and a job’, but which struggled for recognition in policy terms:

“For someone with a 28-year alcohol habit, just having 10 cans a day, not 20, is progress; on the purpose scale, doing one day a month volunteering is a massive achievement... speaking to someone is a major achievement... but these are small things that don’t sell... and they’re not going to sell because politically they’re not seen as important...”

Equality of opportunity remained an elusive concept. The premise that economic volatility could be stabilised by supply-side policies like education and skills policy was exposed after the 2008 financial crash, and it became clear that policies put in place had not shifted the UK’s low-wage/low-skill equilibrium, to provide greater opportunities for social inclusion.

The language was never the most inclusive... I always say to people we were much better at substance than at spin… it was much more about ‘neighbours from hell’ or a more intensive form of support that will really help. On Family Intervention Projects we did present it as a ‘tough’ thing and there is no evidence to suggest it damaged the results... but on Family Nurse Partnerships... arguably presenting it as tough... in my view on family nurse partnerships it was probably a mistake to frame them in that way...”

The ‘tough love’ rhetoric did not always match the reality. With FIPs, for example, evaluations carried out since then suggest that more families were referred for mental health problems and ‘social inadequacy’, than for offending and anti-social behaviour (Gregg 2010). In the case of the New Labour’s use of language, one interviewee reflected:

“The language was never the most inclusive... I always say to people we were much better at substance than at spin... it was much more substance focused, policy focused, we didn’t spend enough time on the branding and the coalition building and the public communication of it. I think there is a lot of out-of-sight for these problems, this is a problem for all political sides... it’s out of sight out of mind for a lot of folk.”

As one interviewee commented, tackling social exclusion was almost always presented as a benefit to a hostile or sceptical public, rather than those it was intended to support:

“Social exclusion only served to present these people as problematic and expensive, and therefore it drove a wedge further between them and ‘the rest of us’. There was very little attempt to make the case for the hard lives these people had led. They were viewed in terms of cost, risk and harm reduction.”

This was underscored by the fact that it was overwhelmingly poor or marginalised groups that were addressed by the Respect rhetoric, rather than wealthier groups or individuals that had broken the moral code.

Tough love’ politics

In the first fortnight of the Brown government, the Respect taskforce was disbanded to signal a different approach to law and order issues. That year the Conservative party and the Sun newspaper began to run the narrative of ‘Broken Britain’. One interviewee explained:

“The public’s view was that they were right [about Broken Britain]. Labour tried to fight back, asserting that Britain wasn’t broken, but this wasn’t very successful, even though the facts didn’t bear out what the alternative narrative was saying.”
Setting the scope of policy

Wide, concentrated and deep exclusion

The initial remit of the SEU was to identify a set of discrete social problems and to adopt clear targets for redressing these problems. There were three goals: achieving a reduction in the scale of truancy and school exclusions; fewer people sleeping rough; and the introduction of a better model for tackling the linked problems of the most deprived neighbourhoods (DSS 1998). These priorities were set by the SEU together with Prime Minister Tony Blair and other key ministers.16

The emphasis on people and place in the early years of the social exclusion agenda was later described by David Miliband as ‘wide’ and ‘concentrated’ (ODPM 2005).17 It grouped together highly visible social problems like teenage pregnancy, truancy and NEETs but it also focused on the ‘area’ effects of concentrations of disadvantage. According to several interviewees, the scope reflected political priorities as well as analysis of need.

At the outset of the Social Exclusion Unit there was an idea that you could focus in on defined problems. How they chose groups was also political: it was partly led by who they felt was failing through cracks between departments, however, it was also led by who had the most political purchase, who attracted the interest of politicians at the time, for example on teenage pregnancy.

Over time, the social exclusion agenda shifted away from a focus on discrete issues and area-based concentrations of disadvantage towards individuals and families facing multiple disadvantage – in David Miliband’s second formulation: ‘deep social exclusion’. In 2006 the new Social Exclusion Taskforce adopted as its core focus the ‘2.5 per cent of every generation caught in a lifetime of disadvantage and harm’, as set out by Tony Blair and Hilary Armstrong in Reaching Out: An Action Plan on Social Exclusion (SEF 2006).

This shift spoke to the success – as much as the failure – of policy up to that point. The assessment was that measures taken on employment, education and welfare had lifted millions out of poverty, increased employment rates and levels of educational attainment with 95 per cent of the population seeing their incomes grow by between 2 and 3 per cent each year. However, those on the lowest incomes had seen the lowest rates of growth and were still experiencing ‘profound exclusion’. There was a realisation that methods had to change, and this led to an increased focus on the principles of early intervention, personalisation and a more systematic focus on what works (SEF 2006).

This shift to address more acute disadvantage and move away from the more universalist underpinnings of the social exclusion agenda intensified the tension within government between an egaliatarian focus on directing resources towards redistribution and a more liberal focus on improving life chances. Several interviewees described a tension in government between spending through the tax and benefits system and the programmes of the social exclusion agenda.

I can remember having discussions at No. 10 Cabinet Office about... if you had an extra pound is it better if it goes... through the tax and benefits system so it goes into the pockets of disadvantaged people or is it better to improve opportunities for them, through services and the like? Essentially different parts of government had different views.

Action on anti-social behaviour was later re-integrated into the Brown political programme in the run up to the 2010 election, but despite the priority and profile given to social exclusion policy under New Labour, the Broken Britain agenda was able to win media support and influence the public. Despite the considerable investment and results achieved, there was not a widely shared perception of success. One adviser suggested that the ‘Rights and Responsibilities’ narrative unravelled towards the end of Labour’s time in power, which undermined public perceptions:

“This is a perception Blair was too tough and Brown wasn’t tough enough, rather than there being a well worked-out analysis or narrative.”

The egaliatarian argument on ‘Opportunity for all’ would be that New Labour’s social inclusion strategy was right to encourage access to employment and training as vital to a secure and stable life. But it would acknowledge that New Labour was naive about what it took to overcome stable life. But it would acknowledge that New Labour’s early emphasis on social solidarity and cooperation collapsed because it was thin and undeveloped.18 On ‘Rights and Responsibilities’, and the moral argument it introduced for support for the most disadvantaged, liberals would argue that the moral framework was correct but that relying on centralised, statist pledges was wrong, everpromising on what central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the central government could deliver.

There was a perception Blair was too tough and Brown wasn’t tough enough, rather than there being a well worked-out analysis or narrative. "There is a hunger for something different. Stop telling us that everything is wrong and that we can punish people or measure people by what they have spent there is this group of people –

For example, see Lamont’s theory of the three discourses contained by social exclusion: redistribution discourse (RD), a more substantial discourse (MSD) and a social integrationist discourse (SID) (Levitas 1998).

Interviewees: The prime minister was very... involved in the choice of subjects. I remember him going in to have a tight, knowing advice to have a tight focus, we said we would look at three subjects in six months..."

As we have seen there was a strong political rationale for the social exclusion agenda having a central place in New Labour’s early political programme. However, agreeing the problem(s) conceptualised by social exclusion and tractable causes and policy solutions would prove more challenging. But the ambiguity of the concept, which served it well in political terms,14 made it more challenging when designing a policy framework from scratch.
The social exclusion agenda, particularly its later scope, took the Labour party into less traditional territory, away from the universal origins of the post-war welfare state towards more personalised and specific forms of intervention. In some respects this reflects a tension between egalitarians and liberals. Egalitarians, while encouraging more support for the most severely disadvantaged, can be concerned that this represents a move away from considering social exclusion within the wider context of poverty and disadvantage and gives the impression that social exclusion policy only needs to be targeted at a relatively small group. They may also be uncomfortable with its similarities to a more conservative, behavioural account of poverty and disadvantage.

Liberals would be convinced that moving to more targeted support for the most disadvantaged is a natural progression for the welfare state, as it has failed to reach the most insecure and vulnerable through more universal responses. Relational thinking would take issue with the notion of the state defining groups of disadvantaged people at all, as their individual characteristics vary and are dynamic. However, the tension is unresolved on the left between egalitarians who support a broad focus for tackling social exclusion, with a more universal orientation and within a wider policy framework of redistribution, and Liberals who prefer a more targeted approach to improve life chances for the most disadvantaged.

Policy design

A rigorous evidence-based approach to policymaking was a distinctive feature of the social exclusion agenda from the beginning. Geoff Mulgan, the architect of the social exclusion agenda, wrote at the time that the SEU would be serious about basing policymaking on evidence, rather than theory. The particular challenges of the politics of disadvantage included a weak political constituency and a reliance on public acceptance for support for unpopular groups, were to test this commitment to evidence-based policy. One interviewee explained:

"The Social Exclusion Unit was very successful in what it set out to do and it used very good analysis. However, even though the focus of the SEU was led by evidence and analysis and the data was good, the political response wasn’t always led by this. There was sometimes a disconnect between the analysis of the problems and what then followed."

Views on the role of evidence-based policymaking in the agenda were polarised. There was a view that without ‘template’ programmes approved by central government, departments and local authorities struggled to know how to allocate their resources most effectively.

"If you look at mental health and drugs where there’s been no ‘template’, the same issues would have had to be looked at, care about these people or families...there was nowhere for that impulse to go because there was no ready-made policy solution in the same way as the mental health family nurse partnerships in health, for example. There was no sense of... if you as a dept or at a local level are worried about not reaching your targets on mental health here’s what you ought to be investing in.”

However, others saw evidence-based policymaking as conflicting with other valid objectives of policy, such as community empowerment and local variation:

"Sure Start was the nearest thing New Labour had to scalable intervention, but because it was designed from the top it couldn’t be re-designed at the bottom to meet bespoke needs of communities so therefore ended up with all Sure Starts as the same. If they had started differently by applying principles of co-production that met the needs of particular communities we would have had Sure Starts that were different but met local needs."

Political and institutional pressures on policy

Evidence-based policymakers was tested in practice by vested interests inside government and the challenge of finding politically feasible ways to resolve thorny social problems. One example relates to attempts to reduce re-offending. The SEU report Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners was the result of a nine-month-long investigation into criminal justice system. The policy argued that prison was not merely failing to prevent re-offending but increasing the likelihood of it by exacerbating problems faced by prisoners including unemployment, debt and broken family links (SEU 2002).

In the report, the SEU came up with a series of recommendations to knit together a cross-government approach to rehabilitation and reducing re-offending. The report was published with no action plan (the first SEU report not to include one) because the relevant government departments only agreed to support the analysis if no specific policy commitments were made.

The government did not respond to the report for two years because of internal wrangling over the recommendations. Ministers eventually accepted a recommendation to close the ‘finance gap’ (the period between leaving prison and receiving the first benefit payment) or ‘social inclusion’ measures, like extra funding on leaving prison (shown to cut re-offending by 20 per cent) or ‘social inclusion’ measures, like extra support for the children of prisoners (shown to be three times more likely than peers to suffer mental health problems), were rejected by the department involved, often after long and acrimonious negotiations. This was typically because departments either failed to see the issue as their responsibility or because the solution did not fit with their own political narrative.

The leaking of some of the most controversial conclusions of SEU reports according to one interviewee:

"I’ve been on so much spin on social exclusion policy. It is remarkable how little policy has been properly assessed. Indeed, all too often prejudice and dogma has substituted for analysis. To improve the performance of policy, it is hardly to over-prepare and act so that they can be improved and adapted before implementation" - Opposition/1998.
In the years following the launch of the SEU, the agenda focused on work, training, housing and early intervention with adults. This was driven by a lack of political pressure from outside the government which could have helped mitigate some of these challenges:

- **“One of oddities of the politics of poverty is that there are so few organisations representing poor people. There’s an established charity world but that doesn’t represent, trade unions have largely given up...what is remarkable was how little external political pressure there was on any of these fronts. That meant that if there was a backlash, as there was from head teachers, there wasn’t much to counter it and so a lot had to be done by stealth, working within the machinery to change things, without that much high politics assailing.”**

Another example relates to political negotiations on how policy was designed. Under the Social Exclusion Taskforce in 2008, the Socially Excluded Adults Public Service Agreement (known as PSA 16) was introduced. The PSA 16 was the first time disadvantaged groups had been the focus of a cross-cutting government target, previous targets had related only to children in care. The PSA focused on four groups: people experiencing mental health distress; care leavers; offenders; and people with learning difficulties. It aimed to shape government policy around ensuring that some of the most vulnerable groups achieved two outcomes: a sustainable home, and a sustainable and healthy future. The focus was never at the people with the most complex needs. Anyone who might wind up being criminals people were really worried about, people like adults with learning difficulties never got a look in as they were low cost and low harm.**

Political influence was also evident in the indicators used to define social exclusion and underpin policy. Which indicators were chosen was essentially a value-based decision, dependent on views of social exclusion and its causal links to poverty. For example, should an individual who is out of work and has mental health problems be defined as socially excluded because of their personal problems or because they are on a low income and experiencing multiple deprivation? The answer may be all of these, but the relative importance attached to different indicators shifts the policy response. Policymakers ultimately determined which indicators were added or dropped. Figure 2 shows a summary of descriptions and indicators used for social exclusion from 1997 to today. The policy focus on unemployment and economic inactivity remained ever present, but there was a gradual shift from indicators of deprivation and disadvantage to include indicators of dysfunction or criminality, as well as a general move from focusing efforts on individuals

To illustrate the point, a table summarizes the changes in the definition of social exclusion and associated indicators from 1997 to 2012:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report/Speech</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Individuals/groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tony Blair (1997)</td>
<td>The poorest people...</td>
<td>Single mothers, five million people working age living in homes where nobody works, people who have never worked since leaving school, 150,000 homeless, 100,000 children not attending school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Exclusion Unit (2004)</td>
<td>Those with multiple disadvantages</td>
<td>Five or more of the following: being a lone parent or a single person, having low qualifications or skills, having a physical impairment, being over 50, being from an ethnic minority group, living in a region of high unemployment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Blair (2004)</td>
<td>The “hardest to reach” families</td>
<td>Individuals including: looked-after children, families with complex problems, people with mental health issues, pregnant teenagers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Exclusion Taskforce (2007)</td>
<td>The 2–3 per cent</td>
<td>Those who suffer from moderate to severe mental health problems, young problem drug users, young offenders, 16–18 year olds who are not in employment, education or training children in care, people who lack functional numeracy or literacy (SEU 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Exclusion Taskforce (2007)</td>
<td>Families at risk</td>
<td>2% of families – or 140,000 families – across Britain experiencing complex and multiple problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Exclusion Taskforce (2007)</td>
<td>Adults facing Chronic Exclusion</td>
<td>Adults experiencing some or all of: poor health prospects - mental and/or physical health issues, a history of exclusion, institutionalisation or abuse, behaviour and control difficulties, skills deficit – unemployment and poor educational achievement, addiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon Brown (2009)</td>
<td>50,000 most chaotic families</td>
<td>50,000 households who have complex needs and have received multi-agency intervention for a considerable period of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Cameron (2011)</td>
<td>‘Troubled families’</td>
<td>120,000 families living troubled and chaotic lives, are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, have children not in school, have an adult out-of-work benefit, cause high costs to the public purse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Summary table of descriptions and indicators relating to social exclusion 1997–2012 (see Appendix for full table)
and areas towards families (see Appendix for complete table). Policymakers ultimately determined which indicators were added or dropped. This led some to suggest that there was a ‘pick and mix’ approach to indicators used under the social exclusion agenda (for example see Levitas 2008).

It is to be expected that the setting of policy priorities and the implementation of policy will be subject to political pressures and institutional barriers. But these factors cannot be separated from the way that political and bureaucratic imperatives played a role in shaping policy, in relation to evidence-based analysis of the scale and severity of social problems. It is also clear that the high profile of the social exclusion agenda brought with it difficulties which limited the impact it was able to have, particularly in more controversial policy areas.

The findings prompt wider questioning of the value of a particular ‘outcome’, rather than individuals, communities and professionals. In so doing it encourages a false notion that outcomes can be guaranteed, whereas instead, the pursuit of objective outcomes should be abandoned, with politics instead focusing on the design of processes – particularly ones that enable relationships.55

Egalitarians would argue that an evidence-based approach to policymaking was the right one, but that this had come at the cost of more widespread reform and that, as a result, not enough had been done to tackle entrenched inequalities. From a liberal perspective however, knowing ‘what works’ is vital to ensure value for money, to secure the effectiveness of policy and to target support as well as possible. Evidence-based policymaking is certainly at an important crossroads: there either needs to be better use of evidence-based programmes to influence mainstream services and improve their impact, or policymakers need to acknowledge that evidence-based programmes are only ever likely to reach a small number of people.

The influence and shape of the social exclusion agenda waxed and waned, partly in accordance with political interest and funding. In the SEU’s innovative and trailblazing early period, the unit reported directly to senior ministers and had relatively little difficulty securing resources. In the middle period, the unit was able to leverage less funding from the Treasury as more conditions were placed on securing funding in spending reviews and the SEU was moved from the Cabinet Office to the ODPM with the aim of bringing the ‘people’ and ‘place’ aspects of social exclusion policy together, but also because it had begun to meet with resistance from key government departments. The move to ODPM reduced its influence with other departments as its cross-cutting role became harder to maintain. Despite having the Deputy Prime Minister as lead cabinet office member, the Unit no longer reported directly to No. 10, a link that had previously given it influence with spending departments.

In the later period of the Blair government, the social exclusion agenda regained high-level political support as Blair took up the agenda again with earnest. The Unit moved back into the Cabinet Office and had its own dedicated minister. However, it still had few executive powers and little budget, relying on its influence, as ultimate responsibility for implementation lay with government departments. The SEU frequently came up against the short-term orientation of government departments and their particular institutional, budgetary and political pressures.

Policy implementation

The early statecraft of the SEU was bold and experimental. It assembled a cross-cutting policy team from various government departments, with half of its small team coming from outside government – academia, the voluntary and private sectors. It experimented with new approaches, like pooled budgets and shared targets, and had specific implementation teams, all elements that were different to a traditional civil service model. This also extended to how the SEU communicated its findings:

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The SEU was originally set up to act as a catalyst for wider governmental action on social exclusion and to institute a set of reforms to improve ‘joined-up’ working across government. This grew out of a critique that the post-war structure of government that divided functions was well suited to specific issues, but less able to tackle complex cross-cutting issues such as social exclusion (Mulgan in Oppenheim [Ed] 1998).”

The agenda began with the insight that there were limits to what could be achieved through a top-down, centrally driven political approach to tackling deep-rooted social problems. It introduced the concept of ‘open policymaking’, with a large-scale consultative process informing the design and implementation of policy, and extensive outreach, which resulted in rich input from a diverse range of groups. One of its most exciting innovations was Policy Action Teams, 18 of which were set up with clear targets and action plans to address specific aspects of social exclusion, ‘like guerrilla warfare in order to speed up a culture change across Whitehall’.56 Following this, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR) was launched in 2001 with the vision that, ‘within 10 to 20 years no one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live’ (CLG 2010).57 It aimed to tackle problems such as unemployment and crime, and to improve the quality of services to excluded communities.

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The politics of disadvantage: New Labour, social exclusion and post-crash Britain

The NSNR was seen by many as delivering the SEU’s legacy of community empowerment. A distinction they lacked local ownership and an enduring approach of ‘best practice’ and performance ‘theory of change’. The ‘one template fits all’ nature of local programmes. One interviewee described how this reflected how a ‘delivery state’ model dominated under New Labour, influenced by NPM practices:

One of more damning findings of the New Deal for Communities is that it didn’t lock into the existing social networks, the existing change mechanisms [in those communities], there is an evaluation which suggests that when New Deal ended, actually the underlying infrastructure of informal networks and support had been weakened by the overlay.

In line with the NPM theory that was influential at the time, NSNR and NDC focused on encouraging people to become more active ‘consumers’ of services rather than being able to determine and develop the nature of local programmes. One interviewee described how this reflected how a “delivery state” model dominated under New Labour, influenced by NPM practices:

“There was a lack of understanding of the processes of change and a theory of change. Getting change to happen is not just to do with the identification of social problems like alcohol or drug misuse, it’s to do with how organisations change. There is a real need to understand the impact of Whitehall on mediating between politicians’ enthusiasm and action on the ground. If you don’t have policies that address civil service culture as well as policies that address the social problem, you won’t make any progress.”

This critique extended beyond government and the civil service into frontline services. On multiple needs, for example, there was a view that policymakers had underestimated the extent to which professionals working in mainstream services need the skills and support to engage with people facing multiple disadvantage.

Accountability and service-user experiences of frontline services

On coming to power New Labour inherited poor systems of accountability, which had gradually eroded under previous governments, and it was determined to restore clear lines of responsibility.

Between 1999–2001 and 2002–2004, the 119 NDC partnerships spent a total of £1.71bn on various NDC projects or interventions (GLG 2010)

Overall in terms of policy implementation, the reforms secured by the social exclusion agenda were often limited to central government and did not extend far enough into local government, public agencies or civil society more widely. Egalitarians would argue that the influence and reach of the agenda was limited by the minimal impact of marginal spending on mainstream programmes. On this view, mainstream spending has to be prioritised if support for the most excluded is to be more than residual. From a liberal perspective, the agenda would have had a more lasting impact on civil society and local communities if, in the case of urban regeneration, for example, it empowered people in local areas to take ownership of programmes.

The relational argument would be that a better understanding of individual behaviour and organisational culture was needed for more widespread reform. New Labour was good at setting up new governance structures and organisations, such as the cross-cutting units that multiplied during the period, but reform didn’t extend further because it neglected the importance of process in favour of a focus on outcomes, overlooking, for example, the importance of nurturing informal networks in communities or treating organisations as agents of delivery rather than as institutions in their own right. It would argue that policy was more likely to be effective if principles were understood as part of a process of more intensive learning and change, and one which was able to work better with uncertainty and complexity.

The experiences of workers and service users also reflected this. For example, interviewees told how the complex long-term achievements of building successful relationships and a sense of purpose in life, which are key predictors of how well individuals cope with and recover from complex health and social problems (Best 2010), could be sidelined. One former homeless worker told the story of ‘Peter’ who had helped move off the streets and into a flat, but who became suicidal because he couldn’t adapt to life away from the daily habits and friendships built up over years of life on the streets:

“We moved him on and stuck him in a flat and he was suicidal…what actually works is the shorthand for this being to possess strong successful relationships and they’re just not as easily understood in policy terms.”

A growing body of knowledge, informed by the insights of social network analysis, suggests that people facing multiple disadvantages cope with and recover from problems such as poor mental health or substance misuse, suggests that the key predictors of change are successful relationships and a sense of purpose, followed by stable accommodation and employment or other meaningful activity. The key turning points in individuals’ lives are frequently psychological and social, the shorthand for this being to possess strong social or ‘recovery’ capital. Evidence suggests that possessing this can reduce the need for midscale intrusive forms of treatment (Best 2010). Building stronger social capital does not necessarily require more resources, but services often fail to prioritise these needs. The ‘audit culture’ tended to focus on the most easily measureable aspects of a service, an approach that was ill-suited to capturing the relational aspect of social exclusion, as one interviewee explained.
The problem is that when politicians move into this terrain, they want the certainty of measurement – but it’s very difficult to get at the effectiveness of social relationships through measurement.

Because of the complexity of their problems and the difficulties they can face in forming trusting relationships, particularly with those perceived as figures of authority, people with multiple disadvantages need highly relational, intensive contact and for a sense of ownership to be restored to compensate for the disempowerment they face as a result of their condition or circumstances (Anderson 2011). However, impressions of public services by service users fitted with the general experience of the most disadvantaged, which include a lack of timely engagement, poor or infrequent contact with professionals, and being given little information about the planning of their support (Anderson 2011).

For example several service users described how there was not enough balance between therapeutic and clinical support in services they had attended:

“When I was offered a three month programme with contact once a week – that isn’t realistic, that’s not going to work.”

One service user told of the difficulty of not receiving timely support:

“You try and seek the help…but by the time you’re offered it I’m all right. I don’t need 3 months or 6 months – everything gets going it’s gone down the line and I might be in a completely different mind set by then.”

Several interviewees told how their lack of support and the experience of the most disadvantaged, which include a lack of timely engagement, poor or infrequent contact with professionals, and being given little information about the planning of their support (Anderson 2011). These interviewees described how:

“We really need to have a much broader participation of people in the area...we really need to have a much more open and non-judgemental [process]”

There was a general view that a clear settlement has not been reached between central and local government as to how to support the most disadvantaged. There were different ideas about how this should be achieved. A liberal perspective was summed up by one interviewee who argued that it should be through local empowerment: if social exclusion moves up the agenda again, I’m sure there’ll be a stronger strand which is about – you get this in ideas like connected care and local commissioning – the idea that really you have to put the power in the hands of those local communities...’

An egalitarian view was described by one interviewee who argued that this should be achieved through ring-fencing and minimum entitlements:

“I don’t assume that any local authority is directing its resource to where it is most needed and equitably...it is important that central government does play a role there.”

The relational argument would be that the idea that central government can guarantee equality is not borne out in practice, that in reality, greater equality is achieved through individuals and communities having the freedom to negotiate better solutions to local problems and through tackling inequalities of power.

However, from many there were simply real concerns about the prospects for disadvantaged people as ring-funded funding is withdrawn and more decisions are reliant on strong local representation:

“The truth is that mostly the policies are that people just want them out and they are seen as outsiders, trouble makers, they don’t want to deal with them, they think they’re from somewhere else. People who stick their head over the parapet find that it is an unpopular agenda, there aren’t votes in this locally, unless people are savvy enough to tell the popular story and your average town councillor doesn’t get it enough to do this.”

New localism?

Another tension identified by interviewees was how far the scope of the social exclusion agenda reflected local priorities and concerns. There was a strong critique of ‘top-down’ approaches to defining and interpreting the problem of social exclusion:

“If you could define the problem, analyse the extent to which it was a problem numerically, identify the geographical locations and then find solutions that worked...it could be done – it was a very industrial approach to public policy.”

Though this was a fairer criticism of the agenda at some points more than others, from the initial choice of issues at the outset of the agenda in 1997, to the socially excluded groups chosen as the focus of the public service agreement in 2006 (PSA 16), centrally dictated targets and defined outcomes restricted scope for local variation. There was still a view that the PSA 16 helped marshal government resources for vulnerable groups in a way that was otherwise unlikely to have happened, but there was also a recognition that this came at the cost of local autonomy:

“When I can understand why top-down target didn’t feel that it had enough local input into it. They put a lot of emphasis on having a PSA target – it was really important because it was having a PSA that meant you got the money, but I suspect that...people in local authorities were also pretty fed up with that approach.”

Several interviewees argued that national policy should establish clarity at a conceptual level but that this should then be interpreted according to local knowledge. In order for this to happen, local government and local civil society organisations needed to have a deep understanding of the changing nature of social problems in their areas to give a stronger lead:

“Local authority leaders pay too much attention to national policy and not enough to problems in their area...we really need to have a much better understanding of society and the globalised nature of it...We’ve got new problems...we have to keep on top of the changing nature of [them].”

There was broader agreement that an urgent debate should be held about what kind of settlement there should be between national and local government as part of a new localism and how this will enable the argument that people get to pass a popular story and voice alongside those around them in a community.
Key conclusions

New Labour’s social exclusion agenda began with the insight that there were limits to what could be achieved through a top-down, centrally driven political approach to deep-rooted social problems. Its early statecraft achieved success in ‘open policymaking’, with a large-scale consultative process informing the design and implementation of policy, and extensive outreach involving a wide range of groups in its efforts to achieve reform. But despite early experimentation, the agenda became associated with an often top-down, centralising and technocratic approach to statecraft.

The greatest achievements of the social exclusion agenda were often those where government could rely on technocratic levers of state to standardise results, for example, falling numbers of children in poverty, numbers of lone parents in work, or to achieve more through meeting one-off targets, such as teenage pregnancies or numbers of people sleeping rough. Three key themes emerge from the findings and deserve greater consideration:

- Limited reform of mainstream services – these working in parallel or isolation from specialist, targeted services, leading to an ongoing problem of ‘failure demand’.
- Systems of accountability that failed to respond adequately to social complexity – the flaws of managerial, technocratic systems of accountability are clear, but it is less clear how the aspects of these systems that need to be retained can be in a less target driven culture.
- Lack of local ownership – there was little scope for local variation as part of some of the evidence-based programmes run by the SEU and local government was not always trusted to lead programmes. With the likelihood of further removal of ring-fenced funding for certain disadvantaged groups, urgent debate is needed about what kind of settlement is needed between national and local government as part of a new localism.

The findings confirm the hypothesis for this research: that the politics of disadvantage combine to create a distinct set of circumstances where the most disadvantaged in society are highly dependent on a precarious and shifting politics. This can protect or enhance their vulnerability. Based on the interview findings and the review above, five key lessons emerge in relation to the politics of disadvantage:

- The most disadvantaged continue to be excluded from the decision-making processes that shape their lives, including their care, how services are delivered and political forums.
- Weak external political pressure means that the impetus is primarily with politicians and policymakers to force the pace of reform, but as other priorities emerge this can be difficult to maintain.
- If a key characteristic of the modern state, according to some political theorists, is the drive to standardise, multiple disadvantage is a prime victim of a political system that fails to respond adequately to social complexity.
- A highly visible agenda for multiple disadvantage can be both a help and a hindrance. It secures attention, but a high profile can make radical reform more difficult to achieve.
- Political legitimacy for investing in support for the most disadvantaged can only be secured on a reciprocal, conditional basis, but this can lead to a polarising and stigmatising political discourse.

Figure 3 summarises analysis of the findings from the three political perspectives. Analysing the findings from these different political perspectives helps bring out the trade-offs and tensions that need to be confronted and resolved in order to consider new ways forward and to begin to reconceptualise social exclusion.
All three forms of political thought can help set out a way forward: egalitarian principles can provide a vision for greater equality and universal support, but without liberal means of individual empowerment and civic renewal this vision may not be realised. A strong relational tendency could help improve the resilience of social bonds and confront the weaknesses of both state and market in relation to tackling disadvantage, but this will require a shift away from the New Labour traits of control and consensus towards greater contingency and contesting of power.

### Political strategy

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<tr>
<th>Egalitarian</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Relational</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Securing public legitimacy ('Rights and responsibilities discourse')</td>
<td>Reciprocity is vital for the legitimacy of public services, but the balance was lost between ‘rights’ and ‘responsibilities’</td>
<td>Rights and responsibilities exacerbated the exclusion of some groups and exploited them for political gain in a way that was undemocratic</td>
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### Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scope of the social exclusion agenda</th>
<th>The focus for tackling social exclusion should be broad, with a universal orientation and within a wider policy framework of redistribution</th>
<th>There should be a targeted approach to improve life chances for the most disadvantaged, the welfare state plus public services formula has failed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence-based Policy</td>
<td>New Labour’s focus on evidence-based policymaking was right, but this came at the cost of widespread reform and did not do enough to tackle entrenched inequalities</td>
<td>Knowing ‘what works’ is vital to ensure value for money, secure the effectiveness of policy and target support as well as possible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statecraft</td>
<td>Evidence-based policymaking encourages a top-down approach, which standardises responses and conflicts with community empowerment</td>
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### Statecraft

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<tr>
<th>Policy Implementation</th>
<th>The impact of the social exclusion agenda was limited by a focus on marginal spending on targeted programmes and didn’t do enough to tackle inequality</th>
<th>Social exclusion policy often lacked local ownership and an enduring legacy of individual empowerment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accountability and localism</td>
<td>Accountability became too centralised under New Labour, but there is scepticism about how greater localism will cater for the most disadvantaged</td>
<td>Reform was limited because, although new governance structures and organisations were set up, they were seen as agents of delivery rather than institutions in their own right</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Systems of accountability standardise and remove any space for contingency and complexity; this keeps power in the hands of the state which should be devolved to civil society and people</td>
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### Figure 3: Analysis of findings from three political perspectives

The mid-2010s: a transformed social and economic context

The political and economic foundations that formed the basis of the social exclusion agenda in the 90s collapsed in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. The associated social and economic change has radically transformed the context for tackling disadvantage.
The story of social exclusion as told in the New Labour years has come to an end. The dominant narrative of a rising tide of general prosperity secured by year on year growth, investment in public services and limited redistributive measures, leaving a small group of excluded people caught up in chaotic situations, is no longer viable in a context of declining living standards, rising unemployment, homelessness and cuts touching a growing minority.

For progressives of all political persuasions there has to be a new account of how support for the most marginalised will form part of the vision for a more sustainable economy and more equal society. Realising this depends on learning from the recent past, and considering the new challenges posed by the social legacy of the recent economic instability.

The weaknesses of New Labour’s economic model of light touch financial regulation to help deliver social justice were exposed by the financial crash. The collapse resulted in a permanent loss of output for the UK and has been followed by the slowest recovery on record. Over a decade of rising living standards and unprecedented growth have given way to entrenched austerity following the crash and as the Coalition’s deficit reduction agenda has taken hold. The decline in average living standards is set to increase until at least 2014, with relative low-income poverty expected to rise until 2015–16, particularly among children (IFS 2012).

In a stark contrast to New Labour’s steady rise in public spending after its first term in government, the Coalition’s deficit reduction agenda will see a sixteen per cent cut in Whitehall departments’ budgets for public services over seven years with departmental spending as a share of the economy only returning to 1998 levels in 2016/17 (IFS 2012). Cuts in public services will disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged, with the overall impact for those in the poorest households equivalent to having more than a fifth of their income taken away (Horton and Reed 2010). As in the mid-1990s there is growing public recognition and anger at income inequality (NatCen 2010), and this is compounded by fury at ‘irresponsibility at the top’ and a mistrust of elites, whether in finance or in politics. Pre-tax inequalities in the UK are among the highest in the OECD, and wage inequality continues to grow to real median incomes stagnating.

Some comparisons can be made between now and when the social exclusion agenda was conceived in the mid-90s. Unemployment is high, back up to where it was in 1979 at 2.6 million. Long-term unemployment is rising, with women worst affected this time round as a result of heavy public sector job cuts. Homelessness is on the increase, with a 15 per cent increase in the number of households accepted as homeless by local authorities in 2011 (CLG 2012). As in the mid-1990s there is growing public recognition and anger at income inequality (NatCen 2010), and this is compounded by fury at ‘irresponsibility at the top’ and a mistrust of elites, whether in finance or in politics. Pre-tax inequalities in the UK are among the highest in the OECD, and wage inequality continues to grow to real median incomes stagnating.

The strategy addresses multiple disadvantage, but policy activity following on from the agenda is narrowly focused on disadvantaged families, prompted by David Cameron’s pledge that the Coalition would be the most ‘family-friendly government ever’ and his commitment to ‘turning round the lives of 120,000 most troubled families’ before the end of this parliament.1 The agenda is being led by DWP so employment is a defining factor and seen as the key route out of poverty, despite widespread working poverty and high unemployment.

A new story of inequality in post-crash Britain is set to be told, one that foregrounds the narratives of homelessness and cuts touching a growing minority. But this is undermined by the lack of a compelling programme for public service reform to compensate for huge amounts of funding being withdrawn from public services and welfare support (see Bubb 2011).

The Coalition has set out its vision for tackling multiple disadvantage and wider poverty in Social Justice: Transforming lives (DWP 2012). The vision it articulates of a ‘second chance society’ resonates with a strong sense among the British public that people deserve to be given an opportunity no matter their circumstances (Kelton in Hampson [Ed] 2010). But this is undermined by the lack of a compelling programme for public service reform to compensate for huge amounts of funding being withdrawn from public services and welfare support (see Bubb 2011).

The overwhelming focus of the Department for Work and Pensions is on reforming the welfare system through major initiatives such as Universal Credit and over-seeing the move to the ‘support’ welfare bill. Another driving force of Coalition policy is the belief that market based mechanisms can drive efficiencies and provide innovative responses to difficult social problems. Under the Coalition, private sector provision of public services has grown in probation, education, and welfare, frequently on the basis of PBR, to minimise upfront spending required by government. However, rigid interventionist approaches, such as PBR, which dictates the speed of engagement rather than responding to the individual’s own pace, very often do not work for people with the most complex needs.

At a local level the spending cuts are driving local councils to retreat into tight statutory responses, pulling back on discretionary support. But perhaps the biggest threat is the withdrawal of ring-fenced budgets, several of which support disadvantaged groups. These include the budget for drug treatment which is currently ring-fenced but will be pooled when allocated to health and well-being boards. The ring-fence for Supporting People, which provided housing for the most vulnerable has also come off.2 The real danger is that adults facing multiple disadvantage income even more isolated, with less support available because of cuts and higher thresholds for support, less local monitoring and analysis, and perhaps most worrying of all, a shrinking voluntary sector.

There is a danger that in responding to the broader challenges of a stagnant economy, falling living standards, rising levels of poverty and pressures on public spending in housing, health and social care, progressives will fail to engage with the specific and complex challenges facing a small minority, regardless of the potential wasted and the wider impact on society. In a programme for national renewal, marginalised groups could get left behind as a broad-based, majoritarian project seeks to appeal to wider interests and stronger political constituencies.

However, this would store up problems for the future and compound the risk of permanent damage being done to the social fabric, with all the misery this entails for families and communities. Instead, the conceptual underpinning, political strategy and policy framework of the social exclusion agenda need to be rethought and rooted in the changed circumstances of our time.

Opportunities and threats facing disadvantaged groups

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the previous government.


2 Note: this process began under the previous government.
Towards a new politics of disadvantage?

Today the language of social exclusion has been replaced by the language of ‘social justice’, adopted by the Coalition government to describe its strategy to tackle the ‘root causes’ of poverty. The Coalition government embraced tackling entrenched poverty as part of its reform agenda on coming to power in 2010, distinguishing itself from the previous government on the grounds of its aim to improve life chances and incentives to work, rather than ‘increasing a reliance on the state’ by compensating for levels of low pay and unemployment.

Tackling disadvantage is posed by the Coalition government as a choice between improving life chances or alleviating income poverty. Rather than reducing ‘snapshot inequality’ through redistributive measures, the aspiration is to help improve social mobility – narrowly focused on children and young people – through improving life chances (Clegg 2010).

In his Hugo Young lecture of 2010, Nick Clegg argued: ‘Poverty plus a pound does not represent fairness. It represents an approach to fairness dominated by the power of the central state to shift money around, rather than to shift life chances’.

Similarly, Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan-Smith criticises the previous government’s strategy for tackling poverty and disadvantage as ‘more concerned with pushing people just above the poverty line’ than with changing their lives, differentiating the Coalition’s approach from that of the left as being about more than the ‘simplistic concept of income transfer’ (DWP 2012). The Coalition articulates a strongly behavioural account of poverty and disadvantage, failing to fully acknowledge the role structural forces play in producing and worsening some aspects of multiple disadvantage. For example, he questions the value of benefits altogether because ‘extra money provided to dysfunctional families may simply be spent on drugs or gambling, rather than on helping children’. 30

This political narrative also caricatures the position of the left which, as we have seen, pioneered many of the policies pursued by the Coalition to tackle disadvantage. The left, in turn, has not fully engaged in this debate, either to respond to the charges or to set out new thinking. A degree of inertia is also the result of the left rethinking its approach to social justice – specifically, how best to tackle inequality, both in its material and non-material forms, and what the new role of redistribution should be in that. There may also be a concern that in engaging too much with issues of family breakdown, addiction and other factors attributed by the Coalition to poverty and disadvantage, the left could compound stereotypes mistakenly being put forward as representative of the poor. But it is misguided to pretend these debates are not happening or that the issues are not real. This reticence leads to a political debate that lacks vigour and candour, provides weak democratic representation for the poorest and most disadvantaged and leaves civil society as the key agitator for greater inclusion. The mixed fortunes of the past fifteen years open up space for considering new and different ways forward to break through this political impasse.

Ways forward

The story of social exclusion told under New Labour, and now of ‘social justice’ under the Coalition government, is that insecurity, isolation and a systematic lack of opportunity are the preserve of a small minority marooned from mainstream society. This story is not true of Britain after the financial crisis, if indeed it ever was. Exclusion and inequality are no longer seen as marginal issues, following the longest decline in living standards since the 1920s and with long-term unemployment back at levels not seen since the mid-90s.

See http://www2.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2011/20112011201t1830vLSE.aspx
Under Blair, the social exclusion agenda understood that the most excluded need different forms of support than the post-war settlement of welfare state plus universal public services could provide. But its mistake was to paint a picture of 2.5 per cent of the population as fundamentally different to the rest because of disaffection, social dysfunction or lack of opportunity. This suggests that the problems of alienation, isolation and poor life chances are confined to a tiny minority, rather than simply hitting this group harder and often in combination.

The Coalition’s ‘Social Justice’ strategy also focuses on a narrow group facing entrenched social disadvantage and poverty, the causes of which are attributed to family breakdown, substance misuse, crime, debt and welfare dependency, while neglecting wider economic inequalities such as in-work poverty and structural unemployment. The lesson of the past decade or so is that both approaches lead to a settlement for the most disadvantaged that is residualised and unstable.

In today’s Britain, a more resilient settlement for tackling social disadvantage will need to focus on the common ground with majority concerns and creating the conditions needed for greater inclusion by going further to restore power and voice to disadvantaged groups. It will mean providing more highly relational and targeted support for those who need it most, but also pursuing long-term, institutional reforms to mainstream services more responsive, providing the ultimate test bed for a more ‘relational state’. For this to secure popular consent, it needs to form part of a bigger argument for social renewal, linking with common concerns like better solutions to complex, expensive problems that look like better solutions to social health problems, social isolation and structural unemployment. Action to reverse this will demand first from charities and trade unions was highlighted by some in this report as one of the reasons why less radical policy progress could be made under the social democratic settlement. Another to save ‘arguments’ pursued by many charities can risk falling on deaf ears in government.34 Charities working with the most excluded could play a powerful role in the public debate by uniting around a campaigning aim of improving public perception and understanding of the lives their clients lead, with the framing of their experiences led by service users themselves.

Stronger platform to defend the humanity and dignity of the most disadvantaged

A stronger platform to defend the humanity and dignity of the most disadvantaged is increasingly needed to challenge the hardening of public attitudes towards the least advantaged, which is creating space for more divisive policies, for example on welfare reform.35 A lack of external political pressure from charities and trade unions was highlighted by some in this report as one of the reasons why less radical policy progress could be made under the social democratic settlement. Another to save ‘arguments’ pursued by many charities can risk falling on deaf ears in government.34 Charities working with the most excluded could play a powerful role in the public debate by uniting around a campaigning aim of improving public perception and understanding of the lives their clients lead, with the framing of their experiences led by service users themselves.

Politics

Crucial to balancing localism and entitlement will be deciding how the most disadvantaged gain power and voice alongside those around them in the community. A priority for this should be stronger organisation of service users to challenge institutions. Just as the past decade or so has seen a wave of activity from professionals, more needs to be done to organise the multiply disadvantaged. Ten years on from the publication of Black Box: commissioning goes independent providers flexibly (see http://www.lankellychase.org.uk), there is a new emphasis on supporting those with the most complex needs, PBR provides little incentive for the intensive, long-term support required. This is still a difficult argument to make, and one that draws support from some on the political centre-left, but, if introduced, would improve the lives of the poorest and most disadvantaged children.

Stronger organisation of service users to challenge institutions

Where there are grounds to build common cause with broader coalitions to link up with majority concerns. Identifying these shared concerns becomes more important as competition for scarce resources increases and public attitudes towards the least advantaged harden. A potential area for this could be a stronger settlement for the most disadvantaged on mental health (see below). A diverse coalition of political, and advocacy groups and service users linking together with the growing constituency of support calling for more talking therapies will be key to establishing this as a mainstream political goal.

Reconciling localism and entitlement

Connecting local priorities more closely with social exclusion policy could create more integrated services and target resources more effectively. However, greater localism also means tough choices, such as not reversing the recent withdrawal of ring-fenced funding for many services which places some disadvantaged groups at risk of losing out on support. In the past, government has sought to promote equality of rights for the most disadvantaged through improvements in local government, for example, with new statutory duties. In a more localist future, new ways need to be found to improve prospects for marginalised groups. Some have argued for greater public scrutiny, or voluntary agreements on entitlements or service guarantees. Others suggest that greater equality is more likely to result from communities having the freedom to negotiate better solutions to local problems. Understanding what entitlement for the most disadvantaged will look like in a more localist future urgently needs to be debated.

New approaches to accountability

More meaningful systems of accountability should be introduced over models such as payment-by-results (PBR) or ‘black box’ commissioning for the most disadvantaged groups. PBR may have a role for some groups, such as those closest to the labour market in welfare to work, but for those with the most complex needs, PBR provides little incentive for long-term support required. ‘Black box’ commissioning36 can also lead to loss of insight and accountability in relation to the ‘hardest to help’ groups. Beyond these practical concerns, both systems set objective outcomes with little or no input from the service user. A different approach which is more likely to meet the relational support would place equal value on processes as on outcome, so that chasing results wouldn’t compromise the qualities of service that are needed to achieve them. It would empower individuals or families to shape the nature of their support and the outcomes they aim to achieve as some innovative services already do37 and base these outcomes on personal well-being and participation as well as on employment or educational goals (see Politics). Commissioning would change too, relying more on close collaboration with local services and knowledge of local need rather than arm’s-length audits.

Notes

34See Layard (2012) How Mental Health Costs Less out of the IRGB where for example calls for a more psychological therapy for those who have suffered from chronic mental health conditions beyond 2014, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/36392/1/healthconomics高峰论坛.pdf

35Other recent concerns in which the multiply disadvantaged have a stake and which could form the basis of the case for power and voice, include securing a job guarantee for those out at work with barriers of intermittent employment for the most disadvantaged or campaigning on a local basis to secure a clearer emphasis on support for the most

36A model for this comes from children in Wales, where groups supporting the poorest and most disadvantaged children for example have essential in achieving the longer-term objectives of securing universal childcare. This too has become mainstream, shared political concern which has widespread public support, and if introduced, would improve the lives of the poorest and most disadvantaged children.

37See for example http://www.lankellychase.org.uk/whitepaper/wealth-of-experience/total-solutions/td/ (Black Box: commissioning goes independent providers flexibly (see http://www.lankellychase.org.uk)

38This is still a difficult argument to make for governments. It is rarely the department making the up-front investment that achieves the savings, and when these do come they are not always sustainable or realistic in the short term. If the case is made, a value for money argument might not lead in favour of spending on the most disadvantaged.

39‘Black box’ commissioning goes independent providers flexibly (see http://www.lankellychase.org.uk)
processes of decision-making, representation and review. Changes in the way services are commissioned could help to set this as a priority for public and voluntary sector services.

For more responsive services for the most disadvantaged, institutional and systems reforms should be prioritised over small-scale initiatives, mainstream over marginal spending, and preventative reach over crisis responses. Reform should include freeing up for resources for more relational support through greater automation and/or transactional responses for those who don’t require personalised support. As a starting point, changes in the mental health system and social services/criminal justice system provide examples for this.

Stronger settlement for those socially excluded by mental health issues

One in six of the population now experience mental health problems and a mental health condition is often a core and exacerbating factor in multiple disadvantage. There have been calls to make available psychological therapies available to more of those with depression and anxiety disorders by extending the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme at a cost of around £300m. This would be unlikely to reach the most excluded, many of whom will need highly personalised interventions to ensure that they can receive support through mainstream systems as they are currently configured.

As part of any general expansion, there should be commitments to reach more socially excluded people, providing highly personalised interventions where necessary, while working to change organisational cultures by building professionals’ skills and knowledge in relation to multiple disadvantage. For example those in the criminal justice system (just over 70 per cent of whom have a mental disorder compared to just under 5 per cent of the general population) and in homelessness services (almost 40 per cent of London’s rough sleepers are estimated to have a mental health problem). Young people with mental health problems should also be a priority due to high levels of unmet need. At a time when the NHS needs to make savings of around £20bn, the associated benefits (for example, mental illness is the cause of half of all incapacity benefit claims) mean mental health should be strongly considered for additional spending and at the very least its budget should not be cut.

A better balance between enforcement and prevention

While preventative services such as social services and probation have become more narrowly focused on the management of risk and enforcement, services with an enforcement remit like the youth justice system and policing have taken on more social support functions. This reflects the enforcement-led response to tackling many social problems under New Labour, and which has not significantly altered under the Coalition. But the approach had varying levels of success. For example nearly all of the targets on education and training, mental health, substance misuse, and housing provision in the youth justice system under New Labour were missed. Challenging this balance could help determine whether the funding going into these services could have better preventative reach. In the same vein there is a strong case for a review of the core functions of social services and the extent to which it can still serve its original purpose (‘the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being’). By extending the IAPT programme. See Layard (2012) How Mental Illness Loses out in the NHS which calls, for example, for a major expansion in psychological therapy for those who have mental illness on top of other chronic conditions beyond 2014. http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/special/cepsp26.pdf

See www.revolvingdoors.org.uk

Conclusion

Our call in this paper is for a new agenda for preventing social disadvantage, which is part of a bigger argument for social renewal and which connects with majority concerns. It should be based on a different understanding of state power, one which doesn’t attempt to drive social change simply through a service delivery mechanism but which also sees it as an exercise in partnership and coalition building. It should take a rigorous and creative approach to designing public services for greater productivity and preventative reach, and it should advocate localism and more meaningful systems of accountability. Most importantly, it would be based on an ethic that sees empowerment as a better route to social responsibility than obligation alone, and would demand this responsibility from all parts of society, not just the most vulnerable.
### Appendix

#### Table of descriptions and indicators relating to social exclusion 1997-2012

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<th>Report/Speech</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Individuals/groups</th>
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| **Tony Blair (1997)** | 'The poorest people... the forgotten people' | • Single mothers  
• Five million people of working age living in homes where nobody works  
• People who have never worked since leaving school  
• 150,000 homeless  
• 100,000 children not attending school |
| **Peter Mandelson (1997)** | 'Today’s Underclass'  
'Our fellow citizens who lack the means, material and otherwise, to participate in economic, social, cultural and political life in Britain today.' | • 5 million families in which no one of working age works  
• 100,000 homeless  
• Single parents of children who are not attending school  
• 3 million people living in the worst 1300 estates |
| **Social Exclusion Unit (2001)** | 'People affected by the most extreme forms of multiple deprivation'  
'A fraction of one per cent of the population' | • Teenagers pregnant under 16  
• Young people excluded from school  
• Those sleeping rough  
• People suffering significant problems  
• 16-18s not in learning or work  
• Alcohol dependant |
| **Social Exclusion Unit (2004)** | 'Those with multiple disadvantages' | Five or more of the following:  
• Being a lone parent or a single person  
• Having low qualifications or skills  
• Having a physical impairment  
• Being over 50  
• Being from an ethnic minority group  
• Living in a region of high unemployment |
| **David Miliband (2004)** | 'Wide exclusion' | Those deprived according to a single indicator:  
• 3.8 million working-age people in workless households  
• 174,000 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training  
• Homeless people |
| **'Deep exclusion'** | Those who are excluded on multiple counts | • Those struggling with basic skills and long-term unemployed  
• A child in poverty, in poor housing, with a parent suffering mental illness  
• Homeless, on drugs, without skills, and without family. |
| **'Concentrated exclusion'** | Deprived areas where there is a geographic concentration of problems | |
| **Respect Task Force 2005/Respect Task Force, cited in Tony Blair (2006)** | 'Families with complex needs' | 7,500 families with problems ranging from behavioural difficulties amongst children to problem parenting |
| **Tony Blair (2004)** | 'The “hardest to reach” families' | Individuals including:  
• Looked after children  
• Families with complex problems  
• People with mental health issues  
• Pregnant teenagers |

#### Report/Speech | Description | Individuals/groups |
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Exclusion Unit (2006)</strong></td>
<td>'Individuals and families who have failed to benefit from the improvements and opportuni ties available'</td>
<td>3.7 million pensioners and people of working age</td>
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| **Social Exclusion Taskforce (2007)** | 'The 2-3 per cent' | • Those who suffer from moderate to severe mental health problems  
• Young problem drug users  
• Young offenders  
• 16-18 year olds who are not in employment, education or training  
• Children in care  
• People who lack functional numeracy or literacy (SEU 2007) |
| **Social Exclusion Taskforce (2007)** | 'Families at risk' | 2% of families – or 160,000 families across Britain experiencing complex and multiple problems. |
| **Social Exclusion Taskforce (2007)** | Adults facing Chronic Exclusion | Adults experiencing some or all of:  
• Poor health prospects – mental and/or physical health issues  
• A history of exclusion, institutionalisation or abuse  
• Behaviour and control difficulties  
• Skills deficit – unemployment and poor educational achievement  
• Addictions |
| **Gordon Brown (2009)** | 50,000 most chaotic families' | 50,000 households who have complex needs and have received multi-agency intervention for a considerable period of time |
| **Department for Work and Pensions (2010)** | 'Individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage' | 11% of UK adults or 5.3 million individuals |
| **'Individuals persistently experiencing multiple disadvantage'** | | 7.7% of population 3.7 million individuals |
| **'Individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage according to a tighter definition'** | | 2.5% of all adults or 1.2 million people |
| **'Individuals persistently experiencing multiple disadvantage according to a tighter definition'** | | 1.7% of all adults or 800,000 people |
| **David Cameron (2011)** | 'Troubled families' | 120,000 families living troubled and chaotic lives  
• Are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour;  
• Have children not in school;  
• Have an adult on out-of-work benefits;  
• Cause high costs to the public purse |
Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the following individuals who were interviewed for this report:

Service users from Revolving Doors and Addaction
- David Miliband
- Geoff Mulgan
- Hilary Armstrong
- Victor Adebowale
- Matt Cavanagh
- Hilary Cottam
- Matthew Taylor
- John Hills

Ruth Lister
- Claire Tyler
- Naomi Eisenstadt
- Christian Guy
- Oliver Hilbury
- Dominic Williamson
- Jonathan Wolff
- Tony Atkinson
- Moira Wallace

Catherine Hennessy
- Gerard Lemos
- Maff Potts
- Peter Kyle
- Kitty Stewart
- Barry Quirk
- Jenny Edwards
- Dominic Williamson

The author would like to thank Jenny Pennington at IPPR for her contribution to research for this report and comments and contributions to earlier drafts. Thanks also go to Nick Pearce, Marc Stears and Graeme Cook at IPPR for the intellectual leadership they have provided on this report. Very helpful contributions have also come from Dominic Williamson, Oliver Hilbury and Julian Cormer.

We would also like to thank David Burrows MP, Kate Green MP and David Hall-Matthews for participating in a panel debate on 11 July 2012 as part of this research which also influenced our findings.

About the author
Clare McNeil is a Senior Research Fellow at IPPR