

Reviews

IMAGES OF WELFARE: PRESS AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO POVERTY

Peter Golding and Sue Middleton

Basil Blackwell/Martin Robertson 1982 pbk £5.95

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THE POLITICS OF POVERTY

David Donnison

Martin Robertson, 1982 pbk £3.50

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THE POLITICS OF POVERTY

Susanne MacGregor

Longman, 1981 pbk £2.95

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POVERTY AND POLITICS

Frank Field

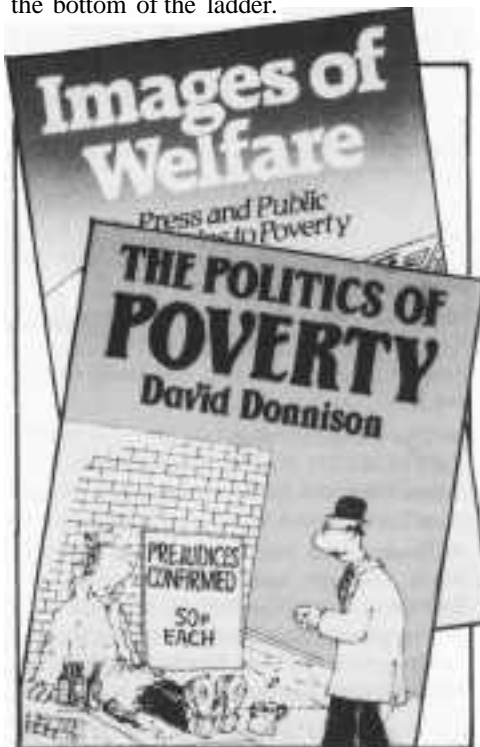
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The past twenty years have seen the numbers in poverty almost double, so that by 1979 more than two million people were living on an income below the official (supplementary benefit) poverty line. No fewer than 9.5 million — one sixth of the population — had an income less than 40% above the poverty line. These figures give no indication of the effects of Thatcher's policies on the poor — the rise in unemployment and the cuts in benefits, the cuts in real wages and the increased tax burden on working people — because one of the Government's first actions was to cancel the annual calculation of the numbers in poverty. The next set of figures will not be available until after the election.

But perhaps this attempt to conceal the effects of present policies on the poor was unnecessarily cautious. For as Peter Golding and Sue Middleton document in their persuasive and readable book on press and public attitudes to poverty, the British electorate are unusually cynical (by international standards) about the nature and causes of poverty, tending always to 'blame the victim', not only for his or her own plight but for the nation's general economic malaise as well. *Images of Welfare* reports the findings of survey research into popular attitudes to poverty and welfare and documents the way they are shaped (though not perhaps created) by the media.

The early postwar years brought with them a belief not only that poverty had been successfully eradicated in all but a few cases but also a tolerance of those who appeared to have been left behind in the general move toward affluence. Such tolerance perhaps was based on a belief that economic growth would allow some addition to the incomes of the poor without threatening the aspirations of the rest of the population. But the deepening economic crisis which developed after the mid-1960s was accompanied by a re-emergence of hostility towards the poor, and towards the very principle of the welfare state. The author's own survey of attitudes in two cities found that this hostility was most virulent amongst the poor themselves — claimants and the low paid — a phenomenon explained by a divisive resentment channelled towards others alongside them at the bottom of the ladder.



Golding and Middleton place their original findings on public and press attitudes (which include the results of interviews with leading social service correspondents) in a historical and theoretical context. They document the move of the Labour Party away from traditional concerns with poverty and welfare, seduced by the prospect of continued affluence until the mid 1960s and by the fear of continued economic decline thereafter. Meanwhile the Tory Party, who had flirted with notions of equity and social justice in the 1950s, fearing that electoral unpopularity might accompany outright rejection of the wartime enthusiasm for the 'Beveridge Revolution', now turned increasingly towards the Hayekian approach in which the welfare state was seen as 'a treacle well and not a life-belt' and in which inequality was to become a central objective of policy. The populist, anti-welfare rhetoric of the late 70s was sufficient to dislodge the welfare-consensus which had in any case never taken deep root.

This shift in the attitudes of the political parties towards poverty, reflecting and reinforcing popular perceptions, has created a new environment in which the poverty lobby must work, but perhaps also increased the latter's importance. This is a theme developed in three other recent volumes on the politics of poverty. Two of these (David Donnison's *The Politics of Poverty* and Frank Field's *Politics and Poverty*) are essentially autobiographical accounts of events surrounding social security policy during the past decade, seen from rather different perspectives. As Chairman of the Supplementary Benefits Commission between 1975 and 1980, Donnison used his position and authority to campaign for improvements in the supplementary benefit scheme in a way which must sometimes have chilled his establishment colleagues and political masters. Field, as Director of the Child Poverty Action Group between 1969 and 1979 saw the same events from a different angle, but both shared essentially the same objectives and approach.

Susanne MacGregor's *The Politics of Poverty* covers much the same ground but places the events, seen from 'the outside', in the context of social security policy since the war. It should perhaps be said that the vogueish title is somewhat misleading for all three books are generally concerned more with social security policy and the role of individual actors than with developments in poverty and inequality in its broader context. They may therefore appeal most to those with a somewhat specialist appetite for details of social security legislation during this period, or to those with a taste for inside

knowledge about the personalities involved rather than to the more general reader. Inevitably, Donnison is most concerned with the administration of supplementary benefits policy; Field with the campaigns for child benefits. 'Whatever question you ask the Child Poverty Action Group', Donnison quips in a friendly jibe, 'bigger child benefits will be part of the answer'. Field explains why. In his view 'The campaign for child benefits has major implications for the structure of British politics, cutting across class interests and mounting an attack on the class mould of twentieth century British politics'.

Both Donnison and Field believe that the poverty lobby must respond to the evident shift in public attitudes towards the poor. Indignant revelation of 'the facts' is no longer sufficient. The labour movement has proved an uncertain ally of the poor, and the poverty lobby must seek new allegiances. While both authors stress the importance of building better links with the trade unions, Donnison argues that the pressure groups must seek to win the support of 'Middle England'; Field that they must employ 'the sharp elbows of the middle classes' to gain more resources for all families, rich and poor alike. 'Poverty' and 'inequality' no longer represent themes around which to build support. The emphasis must be on concepts such as 'the family' and 'children' with



which a broad spectrum of the population can identify and around which they can mobilise. The strategy must be to build a 'family lobby' on what might be the ruins of the 'poverty lobby'. Underlying this strategy is a belief that the poor are a class apart, having interests which only partially coin-

cide with those of the working class as a whole. Susanne MacGregor too believes it to be 'naively optimistic' to expect the patronage of the labour movement for the poor. The poor are 'fragmented, weak, powerless and vulnerable', having little to offer the organised working class in return for their support.

Who, though, are 'the poor'? At least a quarter of them are in families dependent on a full-time wage; others are poor because the resources accumulated while at work are insufficient to tide them over periods of unemployment, sickness and old age. Their interests and experiences are shared with other working people. The dilemma is that these common interests are not always perceived, certainly by the organised labour movement but also — according to Golding and Middleton's research — by the poor themselves. And this, perhaps, is the real failure of the poverty lobby — that poverty is still not a central issue for the radical Left; that the alternative economic strategy (in its many manifestations) has little specifically to say about inequality. If the traditional pressure group tactics of persuasion and discourse with the establishment have failed to achieve their objective of winning real gains for the poor, it is perhaps the tactics that should change, and not the objective.

Chris Pond

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