# *The Politics of Child Poverty in Britain from 1965 to 1990*

**BY**

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***ABSTRACT***

***THE POLITICS OF CHILD POVERTY IN BRITAIN FROM 1965 TO 1990***

*The article discusses the issue of child poverty in Britain during the period 1965 to 1990. It details the increase in child poverty over the period and the extent to which child poverty was a political issue. Focusing in particular on income maintenance policies, it considers the impact on policy of concerns about parental work incentives, public expenditure considerations, the failure to recognise hidden poverty within families and public attitudes towards children. It concludes by suggesting that a citizenship-based approach might provide a more helpful framework for the future.*

**RÉSUMÉ**

**LE TRAITEMENT DE LA PAUVRETÉ CHEZ LES ENFANTS EN GRANDE-BRETAGNE DE 1965 A 1990**

Cet article est consacré à la question de la pauvreté chez les enfants en Grande-Bretagne, entre 1965 et 1990. Il analyse en détail l'aggravation du phénomène, et les aspects politiques de cette question. Il accorde une attention particulière aux politiques de maintien des revenus, aux implications pour les politiques publiques du double souci de maintenir une incitation au travail pour les familles, et de maîtriser les dépenses publiques, au refus de reconnaître la réalité de la pauvreté dans les familles, et à l'attitude de la société à l'égard des enfants. En conclusion, il est suggéré d'adopter à l'avenir une approche fondée sur la notion de citoyenneté.

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This article reflects on a number of issues and themes arising from the political and policy debates around the issue of child poverty in Britain during the period 1965 to 1990. Its main focus is income maintenance, although the importance of child care and labour market issues needs also to be borne in mind.

From this income maintenance perspective, the argument is that the failure to tackle child poverty effectively in this country over this period can be attributed to four main factors.[1] The first is the fear of providing too much help to children's parents, because of the difficulties of divorcing child poverty from family poverty. It is children's misfortune that, in many cases, their parents fall into the ranks of the "undeserving" poor, or, in today's poverty discourse, demonstrate the condition dubbed "welfare dependency". The Poor Law "less eligibility principle", under which the relief provided for the poor should not render them as "eligible" as the poorest labourer, has continued to dominate policy-making through a concern that social security benefits should not create disincentives to take paid work.

Secondly, from the mid-1970s, an anti-public expenditure culture in government meant that financial support for children was the victim of the iron grip of the Treasury, which controls public spending. Thirdly, there was a reluctance to take seriously the question of the distribution of resources within the family and its implications for child poverty. Fourthly, it is possible to identify a profound ambivalence in British attitudes towards children and towards the respective responsibility of individual parents and the wider community in meeting the costs, direct and indirect, of raising children.

The article will return to these arguments later. First however, it will establish very briefly the position with regard to children and poverty at the end of the 1980s and compare this with the mid-1960s when child poverty was 'rediscovered' in Britain, leading to the establishment of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG).[2]

## *The Facts of Child Poverty from the Mid-1960s to 1990*

A passage from the editorial of the second edition of CPAG's journal *Poverty* conveys the sense of urgency felt at the time. By 1990, after 25 years of campaigning, much of it in a cold political climate, this sense was perhaps lacking. The editorial was talking about children living below social assistance level:

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[1] Although it is outside the time-frame of this article, it should be noted that the contemporary politics of child poverty has been transformed by the commitment given by the New Labour Government in 1999 to eradicate child poverty in two decades and halve it in one.

[2] The Child Poverty Action Group, for which I worked during the period 1971-1987, is a charity which campaigns against child poverty. It is widely recognised as the leading organisation in what is often called the "poverty lobby".

> *At least half a million children in Britain have experienced poverty and deprivation for 90 days since our first issue. Things are moving, but how fast? Must they face another 90 days of poverty: A year? Two years? Must we tell half a million children to be patient, to accept the drab, cheerless existence, which is all they have ever known, until the rest of us – the prosperous ones – are ready to open the gates of opportunity?*[3]

Two decades later, the number of children living below social assistance level had hardly changed – 490,000 according to estimates by the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies, using official data. The figures may not be strictly comparable, but the broad conclusion is valid. The position with regard to the numbers on social assistance itself was much clearer and worse. There had been a four and a half fold increase, from under half a million to over two million children being raised on social assistance – originally named national assistance, then supplementary benefit and from the late 1980s, income support. This was over a period when the total number of children in the population had gone down and the number of dual-earner families with children had increased.

It is true that the real value of social assistance had improved over that period. Nevertheless, a number of qualifications still have to be made. First, social assistance still only provided a very small amount, which research suggested was inadequate to meet the needs of children. Secondly, as David Piachaud pointed out in his memorandum to mark CPAG's 21st Anniversary in 1986,[4] social assistance rates had fallen relative to average incomes; between 1986 and 1990 the gap between social assistance rates and average earnings grew wider still.

Thirdly, in the same way that minimum needs are socially and culturally defined and change over time, so too do the costs of childhood. This point has been illustrated by Marina Warner: *"The market's dream is to make every child expensive. Children have become a consumer target through their parents' pockets and their guilt."*[5] Advertisers have coined the term "pesterpower", an interesting and insidious twist to the idea of consumer power. A good example was the National Consumer Council's finding that lone mothers were particularly likely to buy their children expensive trainers as a way of compensating for what they felt was lacking in their lives.[6] One of the most moving reports published by CPAG was based on letters, mainly from mothers, about what Christmas was going to mean to them. The letters described the guilt that wracked them because they could not give their children the expensive toys

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[3] CPAG, "Ninety days of poverty", *Poverty*, No 2, Spring 1967, p. 1.
[4] David PIACHAUD, *Poor Children: A Tale of Two Decades*, London: Child Poverty Action Group, 1986, 16 p.
[5] Marina WARNER, *Into the Dangerous World,* London: Chatto, 1989, p. 53.
[6] Janice ALLEN, "Mother's Ruin", *Consumer Voice*, Winter 1990/1, p. 1

that our consumer society dangles in front of children's eyes on TV.[7] There are also implications for educational development; for example, home computers were by then becoming an important element in middle class children's education.

David Donnison, former Chair of the Supplementary Benefits Commission, which advised the Government and administered the discretionary elements of the social assistance scheme between 1966 and 1980, put it well: *"We constantly manufacture new forms of poverty as we drive forward the living standards of the majority without thinking what we are doing to those who cannot keep pace."*[8] This raises the issue, in particular, of "what we are doing" to poor parents, who feel they are failing their children because they cannot give them the kind of childhood that better-off families take for granted.

The fourth point here is that, if we take as our definition of children that which is used for the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which is children and young people under 18, then during this period, we witnessed the emergence of a group of children who were not just living in poverty, but who were living in destitution. These were young people aged 16 and 17 who lost the right to social security in 1988. This fed into increased homelessness and begging among young people. Begging was not an issue in the 1960s in the way that it became in the 1980s.

## *The Politics of Child Poverty from the Mid-1960s to 1990*

The importance of child poverty as a political issue waxed and waned over this period. It was sometimes expressed through other issues, in particular, the introduction and then treatment of child benefit, the universal benefit for children. According to Keith Banting, with the rediscovery of poverty in the mid-1960s, *"family poverty quickly became the leading social issue of the decade, confronting the Labour Government with one of its most difficult social policy decisions."*[9] Banting noted that, although family poverty was an important political issue, it was not a key one for organised labour (see below) and it never became a major concern of the electorate, which was a critical factor and one which was not to change.

Banting suggested that social scientists, through their involvement in CPAG, had an important impact in making family poverty a political issue and in *"changing the way in which policy-makers interpret British society." "Their impact on the salience of the issue and the final policy response, however, was much less"*, he wrote. *"The relative importance of the issue was settled on strictly political criteria; sensitivity among political elites ensured social action, but the lack of broad electoral support foreclosed the chance of major reform."*[10] During the 1980s social scientists did not even have the limited impact that Banting attributed to them in the 1960s.

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[7] Stephanie McEVADDY & Carey OPPENHEIM, *Christmas on the Breadline*, London: Child Poverty Action Group, 1986, 22 p.
[8] David DONNISON, *The Politics of Poverty*, Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982, p. 226
[9] Keith BANTING, *Poverty, Politics and Policy*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979, p. 66.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 106,

Reflecting on the unpopularity of the policies that the 1965–1970 Labour Government did pursue (the increase in family allowances with claw-back through the tax system), Frank Field, Director of CPAG between 1970 and 1979, subsequently highlighted what he saw as a significant weakness in the Group's lobbying on family allowances.[11] This was the failure ...

> *... to convince the Government of the need for a massive educational campaign on the extent of family poverty and the importance of increases in family allowances to any meaningful anti-poverty strategy. With the lack of a positive lead, the welfare hawks found it easy to drag the increased allowances into the ever-widening work-shy/scroungers debate. The result was catastrophic. The previous political antipathy to Family Allowances was doubly reinforced*.[12]

CPAG's indictment of the Labour Government's record on family poverty during the 1970 General Election campaign was notorious, but there was no evidence to suggest that it actually influenced the outcome of that campaign or was a significant factor in Labour's defeat, as the Labour Party claimed at the time. Elections are not won or lost on the issue of poverty in Britain, and neither CPAG nor any other group has managed to make child poverty an issue in any subsequent election, despite repeated efforts to do so. For the rest of the period in question, child poverty was not to become again the salient political issue it was in the second half of the 1960s. There were occasions when, for instance, the latest statistics or a particular report may have hit the headlines, but they were all one-day wonders and they had no real impact on policy-making or the policy process.

In contrast, child benefit *was* at times a significant political issue. The main example was in the late 1970s when Frank Field leaked Cabinet papers he had been given to the journal *New Society*, revealing the plans of the 1974-1979 Labour Government to ditch child benefit, which it was pledged to introduce in place of family allowances and child tax allowances. The ensuing outcry forced the Government to go ahead and phase in child benefit, thereby extending universal cash support to the first child. It then tried to make a virtue out of a necessity and introduced, in 1978, what it called a "Family Budget", at a time when the family was becoming something of a political football.

This was the period when Frank Field, in particular, was looking to the development of a lobby for families generally, within which to push the claims of poor families. The case was restated in his book *Poverty and Politics.*[13] However, insofar as a family lobby did develop, it was not a strong one and elements of what

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[11] Family allowances were introduced after the Second World War for all children other than the first. They were taxable and paid alongside child tax allowances. In a, less generous, variation of a recommendation made by CPAG, the increase in family allowances implemented by the Labour Government was "clawed back" from standard rate taxpayers in receipt of child tax allowances.

[12] Frank FIELD, "A pressure group for the poor", pp. 145-157 in David BULL (ed.), *Family Poverty*, London: Duckworth.

[13] Frank FIELD, *Poverty and Politics*, London: Heinemann, 205 p.

might be called a "family lobby" tended to embrace a very narrow, traditional, conception of the family. The case for a family lobby also raised something of a dilemma for groups like CPAG. This concerned the relative priority that should be given to lobbying around child benefit, which was relevant to all families, and around the inadequacy of social assistance rates for children, which was of more immediate relevance to those actually living on social assistance but of none to other families. The dilemma was heightened by CPAG's long-term aim, shared by many in the social policy field, to reduce the numbers reliant on means-tested assistance, because pressing for improvements in social assistance rates would increase the numbers eligible for social assistance.

Child benefit was also an important political issue at times during the 1980s; in particular in the early 1980s when, interestingly, it was the flag behind which the Conservative "wets" rallied.[14] As a result, the cut in its real value, which was made immediately after the Conservatives came to power, despite their strong protestations of support for the benefit when in Opposition, was more than restored before the 1983 election. The strong support that then existed for child benefit within the Conservative Party, on sections of the right of the party was well as the left, (and particularly then among the Conservative Women's Committee a very powerful group in the party) meant that it survived the Fowler Social Security Review.[15] This was despite very strong earlier suggestions in the press (believed to be official kite-flying) that it was either going to be means-tested or taxed.

Subsequently, it became clear that under the Thatcher Government, survival did not mean protection, as child benefit was put into the deep-freeze and not up-rated alongside other social security benefits. Had it not been for an Election Manifesto pledge that *"child benefit will continue to be paid as now, and direct to the mother"*, it is likely that the Conservatives would have tried to abolish child benefit during Mrs Thatcher's third term. As it is, it survived and those at the top of the Tory Party at the end of the 1980s were the same "wets" who rallied around child benefit at the start of the decade. In particular, John Major, who replaced Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, was a supporter of child benefit. According to Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1983 and 1989, one of Major's earliest acts as Prime Minister was to overrule his Chancellor, causing it *"to be announced in March 1991 not only that Child Benefit would be increased, but that it would henceforth be increased every year in line with inflation. This,"* Lawson, who was opposed to child benefit, commented, *"was a big mistake"*.[16]

The cuts that were made in the real value of child benefit were justified with reference to improvements in means-tested benefits for the poorest children.

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[14] Conservative "wets" were Members of Parliament on the left of the Conservative Party who were dismissed by Mrs Thatcher as too "wet" or ineffectual to have an impact, although they did, in fact, help to restrain the Thatcher Government's assault on social security.

[15] The Fowler Review was a comprehensive review of social security carried out in the mid-1980s by the then Secretary of State responsible for social security, Norman Fowler. One of the main outcomes was increased reliance on "targeting" or means-testing.

[16] Nigel LAWSON, *The View from No 11*: London: Bantam Press, 1992, p. 729.

However, the cost of these improvements never matched the savings, which disappeared back to the Treasury to fund, for example, income tax cuts. That is despite the Fowler Review's prioritisation of poor families with children, based on the clear evidence that they were the group now facing the greatest hardship.

That Review did make some changes that were aimed at helping poor families with children, particularly the introduction of a family premium (i.e. an additional payment for families with children that does not vary according to the number of children) for those on income support. However, the evidence suggested that those changes were not sufficient to counteract a number of adverse changes. Particularly controversial was the loss of single payments, which were paid as of right to help with lump sum needs such as furniture. Single payments were replaced by the social fund, which paid mainly loans rather than grants, on a discretionary basis, out of a cash-limited fund. Whereas, families with children were the main beneficiaries of single payments, they were not treated as a priority category for grants under the social fund (although lone-parent families fared better than might have been expected, particularly in instances of domestic violence). A significant body of evidence (particularly from traditional children's charities) suggested that many families with children were finding it even harder to make ends meet after the Fowler reforms than before them.

Similarly for those in work, the situation was that of "swings and roundabouts". The new family credit (a means-tested benefit for low income working families with children) was considerably more generous than the family income supplement it replaced. However, at the same time, there were big cutbacks in housing benefit (means-tested assistance with rent paid both in and out of work). Family credit also counted as income for housing benefit purposes. As a result, there were few working families who still qualified for housing benefit. Moreover, part of the increased generosity of the family credit scheme was due to the abolition of free school meals for those in work; the family credit was supposed to cover the cost.

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Following this abbreviated history, the article now turns to look at the factors outlined earlier that help to explain why the position with regard to child poverty deteriorated between the mid-1960s and 1990.

## *The Labour Market and "Behavioural Poverty": Blaming the Parents*

The main reason for the big increase in the numbers of children living in poverty over this period was unemployment; and the unemployed have traditionally been the outcasts of the social security system. Fears of undermining work incentives, the modern equivalent of "less eligibility" (see above), and concerns about equity between the poor in and out of work, have provided a strong brake on benefit levels generally for those on social assistance below pension age. They were, in particular, a cause of resistance to efforts to improve the position of the long-term unemployed

with children, who were one of the most deprived groups. Indeed, the 1974–79 Labour Government refused to extend the long-term rate of supplementary benefit (a modest supplement paid after two years on benefit) to the unemployed, despite pressure from the Supplementary Benefits Commission (SBC), the Trades Union Council and various other groups. The reason was not because it was expensive to do so, (it was not very expensive at that point) but because, so word has it, the Government was afraid of being seen to do too much for the unemployed.

One of David Donnison's repeated messages, both when he was at the SBC, and subsequently, was that *"the living standards and morale"* of the "working poor" with children *"impose a political ceiling on what any Government can be expected to do for people who are not in work."*[17] That political ceiling remained extremely low over this period, thereby hurting the children of the poor, both in work and out of work. The other side of the coin is that the 'less eligibility' principle has also been helpful in debates around family allowances and child benefit. John MacNicol, in his study of the introduction of family allowances, for instance, suggested that of all the arguments put forward, including those concerning working class family poverty, *"the suspicion must remain that it was the less eligibility function of family allowances that appealed most to Beveridge"*.[18] The same was probably true of quite a few of the Conservative MPs who supported child benefit in the 1980s. In other words, because child benefit is paid to working families and is counted as income for the purpose of calculating social assistance for the workless, it acts as a work incentive.

Another important factor in the increase in the number of children in poverty was the increase in the number of one-parent families and in the proportion of them claiming social assistance. Here, concern for "the family", or at least the traditional variant of it, militated against the provision of adequate support for children in poverty for fear of making the state of lone parenthood look too attractive. Growing official concern about the position of lone-parent families by 1990 seems to have been motivated less by a concern about the poverty they experienced than a desire to shift responsibility for their upkeep, that of the mother as well as the children, from the public to the private sphere. The vehicle was primarily the extension and tightening up of fathers' maintenance responsibilities, through the introduction of the Child Support Act, but also, with rather more ambivalence, through social security changes designed to encourage lone-parents to take paid work. The ambivalence regarding the latter reflected different views in the Conservative Party about the "right place" for mothers.

The reform of maintenance provisions was part of a wider thrust in Government policy inspired by the New Right in the United States but redolent of older themes in debates about welfare. In the discourse of the New Right, the emphasis was on the dangers of reinforcing "behavioural poverty" by encouraging "dependency on the benefits culture". Attitude surveys and opinion polls, in fact, suggested that public attitudes were much less punitive towards poor people in the late 1980s than they

[17] David DONNISON, *The Politics of Poverty*, Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982, p. 230.
[18] John MACNICOL, *The Movement for Family Allowances 1918-45*, London: Heinemann, p. 186.

were in the mid-70s, possibly reflecting more personal contact with poverty as unemployment and lone parenthood became more common. Nevertheless, there also appeared to be considerable ambiguity in these attitudes and old ideas about the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor still ran very deep. Thus, the talk about reducing dependence on the "benefits culture" did strike responsive chords in some quarters, not least because there was an element in it with which many people would probably agree: there were many people on social assistance who would like nothing more than to be earning a decent wage but the jobs were not available, certainly not with a decent wage. Moreover, in the case of lone parents, the childcare was often not available to make paid work a viable option and, more generally, the benefits system itself created a number of barriers to moving into paid employment.

However, whatever one thinks of the behavioural poverty thesis, children cannot be held accountable for their parents' behaviour. Yet they were likely to be the chief victims of what were, in effect, social engineering policies designed to modify that behaviour. This was an argument that was explicitly taken account of in *The New Consensus on Family and Welfare,* published in the United States, written by Michael Novak and a long list of academics, spanning the political spectrum in the States. In the context of discussing benefits sanctions for those who refuse to take paid work without good cause, Novak *et al* stated:

> *There will be cases, for example, in which cutting of the benefits of a parent or parents who do not fulfil their obligations will result in "punishing" the children. Such cases are undeniably difficult. But three considerations must be kept in mind in resolving them: (a) to keep children at risk by allowing their parent or parents to act irresponsibly may be to harm the children even more grievously; (2) to make flagrant exceptions is to undermine the system as a whole; and (3) to allow parents to use their children as hostages is to invite massive abuse, while confirming the parents in the hypocrisy of their ways*.[19]

## *Public Expenditure: Double Standards*

When one looks at the political battles around financial support for children, many of them boiled down to a battle with the Treasury.[20] The public expenditure implications were an important factor in the on-going debate between those who prioritised universal support for children, arguing that it is the most effective way of helping poor children, and those who prioritised selective, or in the late 20th century jargon "targeted" help, confined to those defined as poor. The Thatcher Government was the first Government, apart from a very brief period during the 1970-1974 Heath Government, that had not regarded means-testing as a necessary evil but which espoused it as a positive end in its own right. That Government also made clear at the

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[19] Michael NOVAK *et al.*, *The New Consensus on Family and Welfare*, Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, p. 115.

[20] For a general discussion of the Treasury's role in social policy, see Nicholas DEAKIN & Richard PARRY, *The Treasury and Social Policy*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, 234 p.

outset that it considered public expenditure to be at the heart of Britain's economic problems.

The domination of these public expenditure considerations also meant that, as noted earlier, the resources put into "targeted" benefits were limited and were, in effect, transferred from other families with children or other social security recipients, rather than from the general body of tax-payers. Part of the sub-text was the public expenditure accounting conventions that treat child benefit – but not tax allowances – as public expenditure. So the switch from child tax allowances to child benefit, in 1979, meant a significant increase in public expenditure on children.

Members of the Thatcher Government, who were senior Opposition spokespersons at the time, argued, in the late 1970s, that this was ridiculous and that when they came into government, child benefit would be treated in the same way as a tax relief for public expenditure accounting purposes. The iron grip of the Treasury meant that no more was heard of such heresy once they did come into government. It is a matter of conjecture whether had there been a change in public accounting conventions, the subsequent history of child benefit might have been rather different. On the other hand, the value of child tax allowances fell relative to that of the adult tax allowances during the post-war period, although they were not a political issue in the way that child benefit subsequently became.

## *The Distribution of Resources within the Family*

To the extent that policy-making is based on empirical evidence, there has long been a fundamental flaw as regards poor children – that is that the empirical evidence about the incidence of poverty always uses families or households as the income unit. There has built up a growing body of evidence, and no longer just from small-scale studies, to suggest that the incidence of poverty also depends on the distribution of income within families. Where income is not shared fairly, it can mean hidden poverty among women and children. This was an issue recognised by Eleanor Rathbone in the early twentieth century when she campaigned for the payment of the original family allowance to mothers.

To a certain extent it was also acknowledged in the replacement of child tax allowances by child benefit, which was dubbed a switch from "wallet to purse", as resources were moved from child tax allowances, received mainly by fathers, to child benefit, paid mainly to mothers. Nevertheless, the Labour Government was prepared to sacrifice that switch the minute it thought that male trade unionists were not going to like it and that the reduction in fathers' tax relief might torpedo their pay policy. The Conservative Government was also prepared to sacrifice the principle, with its proposals in the mid-1980s to pay family credit through the pay packet, for very similar reasons – to dampen the pay demands of low-paid male workers. At the end of the day, it was not the power of the argument that ensured that family credit was paid to the mother; it was the fact that CPAG was able to put together a coalition of interests, that included not just the family/women's/poverty lobbies, but also the small business lobby. This caught the Government in what Ministers informally acknowledged was a "pincer movement".

The whole trend of policy under the 1979-97 Conservative Governments away from universal or contributory benefits towards means-tested benefits, calculated inevitably on the couple's joint income, meant that the problem of hidden child poverty became less well-addressed by the social security system. Indeed, it was part of the New Right's project to shift dependency from the public sphere to the private sphere of the family. This served to increase women's financial dependence on men and to make them, and hence their children, more vulnerable to poverty.

## *Attitudes Towards Children*

The final factor is broader, and in some ways, deeper than those discussed above. There is, I believe, an ambivalence in British society's attitudes towards children, which is relevant to the question of child poverty. On the one hand there is a tendency to sentimentalise and idealise children. There was also in the 1980s a new phenomenon: the representation of children as "the latest-must-have-accessory", as one journalist put it, which was almost a caricature of Marina Warner's observation that *"the child of the eighties has been privatised"*.[21] She attributed this privatisation to the mood of the 1980s, but the tendency had been there much longer. Thus, for example, young children were not welcome in the adult world in this country in the way that they were in France and southern European countries and therefore that public adult world did not really accommodate them.

More pertinent to our subject is society's attitude towards the division of responsibility for children between individual parents and the wider community or the State. Of course, there is a recognition of the State's responsibility for children's education and, more recently of its ultimate responsibility to protect children against the abuse of their parents or other adults. However, there has been much less acceptance of how the State might provide a preventative role through material support or of the State's general financial responsibility for both the direct and indirect costs of children.

Peter Moss has written of the *"prevailing indifference to the indirect costs of parenthood"* in Britain, linking it to dominant ideologies around motherhood and the care of children.[22] He also noted a point made by Bronwen Cohen that, increasingly during the life-time of the 1979-87 Conservative Governments, childcare provision was seen as being *"primarily a private matter between parents and private and voluntary services."*[23] This attitude was exemplified in the comment of the (male) Minister with responsibility for women: *"I don't think the State should step in to help the working mother unless her life has collapsed."*[24]

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[21] Marina WARNER, *Into the Dangerous World*, London: Chatto, 1989, p. 18.
[22] Peter MOSS, "The indirect costs of parenthood: a neglected issue in social policy", *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 8, n° 3, Winter 1988/9, p. 30.
[23] Bronwen COHEN, *Caring for Children*, London: Commission of the European Communities, 1988, p. 18.
[24] John PATTEN, *The Guardian*, 2 January 1989.

The introduction of the family allowance was in part a recognition that the wider community does have an interest in the well-being of children as its future citizens and this view continued to be expounded by social scientists such as Joan Brown. But there was also an increasingly strongly expressed view during the 1980s, in Michael Beenstock's phrase, that having children is *"essentially a private matter."*[25] They were being likened to other expensive consumer goods. Andrew Dilnott and colleagues from the Institute for Fiscal Studies argued that parents choose to have children *"for reasons of personal pleasure, rather than social obligation"* and they asked *"what then is the source of their claim on the rest of society?"*[26]. Such arguments tapped deep-rooted attitudes put most crudely in the (male) expression – *"why should I pay for another man's pleasure?"*

This sentiment underlined some of the hostility that has always existed towards family allowances/child benefit. Attitude surveys that asked about the priority between social security benefits tended to put child benefit fairly low, although at the same time it was very strongly valued by mothers. However, at any point in time, mothers with children are a minority of the population and poor mothers with children are an even smaller minority. In his memoirs, Nigel Lawson, wrote approvingly of the *"moral sense of the nation"* which is more sympathetic to the plight of pensioners than to that of poor families with children.[27] Such attitudes were also reflected in the position adopted by organised labour. Although the trade unions supported child benefit, they never really fought for it actively with the kind of campaign that, for instance, the Transport and General Workers Union (then the largest trade union) waged in the mid-1970s to improve the retirement pension.

## *Conclusion*

The conclusion to be reached at the end of the 1980s was a pretty dispiriting one. Despite the 25 years' work of the Child Poverty Action Group, which has been called one of the most effective pressure groups in British politics, and despite the intervention during the 1980s of more traditional service charities, such as Barnardos, National Children's Home and the Children's Society, the position regarding children and poverty was as bad as, if not worse than, it was in the mid-1960s when child poverty was 're-discovered'. Moreover, it was more difficult 25 years on from the 're-discovery of poverty' to catch hold of the attention of politicians and the media, never mind the general public. Child poverty was not a serious political issue; child benefit was intermittently one, and unless new angles could be found, the media treated poverty as "boring".

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[25] Michael BEENSTOCK, "Rationalising child benefit": paper given at Policy Studies Institute seminar, London, June 1984, cited in Joan BROWN, *Child Benefit. Investing in the Future*, London: Child Poverty Action Group, 1988, p. 1.
[26] Andrew DILNOT, John KAY & Nick MORRIS, *The Reform of Social Security*, Oxford: Institute for Fiscal Studies/Clarendon Press, 1984, cited in Joan BROWN *op. cit*.
[27] Nigel LAWSON, *The View from No 11*, London: Bantam Press, 1992, p. 595.

This article has tried to suggest some of the reasons why the position with regard to children and poverty was still so bad by 1990. Although it has focused on the politics of financial support for children, key underlying factors were the rise in unemployment and the barriers to the labour market participation of many mothers. There may be different factors that others would prioritise. Some, for instance, might want to argue that groups like CPAG were wrong in focusing so much on child benefit, and that instead there should have been more attention paid to the benefits of the poorest children. Alternatively, perhaps it was wrong to put too much emphasis on poverty and not enough on children. This was an argument put by the journalist Sarah Benton, speaking at CPAG's Annual General Meeting in the late 1980s. She believed that CPAG should ally itself more to the children's rights lobby than to the poverty lobby. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provided a possible focus for such an approach. My own personal view is that it should not be a case of either/or: what is needed is a balance between the two. That balance has to be sensitive to the political and social environment at any point in time.

One way of bringing the two together might be through the framework of citizenship, because potentially it is a more positive approach, arguing for people's rights as citizens, rather than just focusing on the negativities of poverty. It raises the issue of children's rights. It also raises questions about the involvement of people in poverty themselves – their agency as citizens – recognising that the powerlessness associated with poverty does not necessarily have to mean passivity. There is a danger when those of us who are not poor talk and write about poverty, that we give that impression of passivity – as does the media. The lack of involvement of people in poverty themselves in national campaigns against child poverty may also be a factor that has weakened these campaigns, both reflecting and exacerbating the political marginalisation of poor families and of child poverty as an issue.[28]

[28] This is an issue which has become much more salient in the politics of poverty in the last few years. An example is the establishment after the 1995 UN Copenhagen Summit**,** which called for participatory anti-poverty strategies, of the UK Coalition against Poverty, committed to the involvement of people in poverty in anti-poverty debates and policy-making.