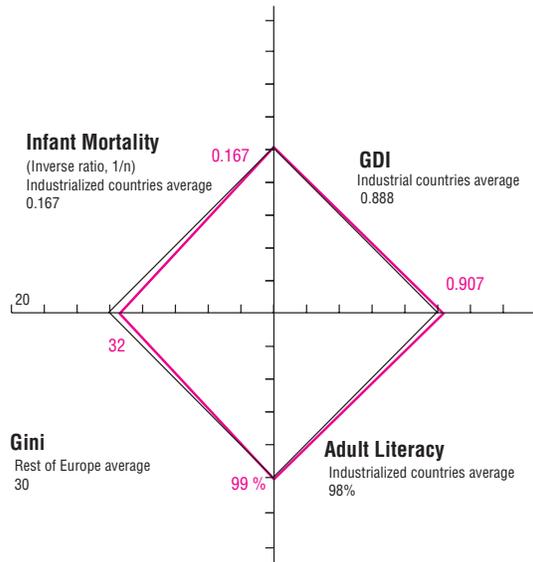


•FRAN BENNETT



The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue.
 Source: **Infant mortality:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; **Adult literacy:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; **GDI** (Gender Development index): UNDP, *Human Development Report 1998*; **GINI:** World Bank, *World Development indicators 1998*. (The regional average for this indicator was calculated by *Social Watch*).

The new Labour government has identified poverty and social exclusion as key issues, and declared its intention to tackle their root causes in a cross-departmental, integrated way. It is committed to mainstreaming gender

MAKING PROGRESS... BUT NOT ENOUGH

awareness, and improving representation of women and ethnic minorities. But its approach to social development is not couched in the language of social and economic rights, or redistribution, but of inclusion, opportunity and responsibility;¹ and the Copenhagen commitments are not used as reference points. Critics have accused it of failing to challenge sufficiently the current supply-side and market-oriented orthodoxies, and of echoing the residualist rhetoric about welfare common in the USA.

«WE COMMIT OURSELVES TO CREATING AN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND LEGAL ENVIRONMENT...»

The UK government has incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into British law, facilitating legal challenges on civil and political rights. But it is more sceptical about the value of legislation guaranteeing social and economic rights; and, although it has signed the Council of Europe's revised Social Charter, it has refused to ratify the collective complaints procedure. In the area of children's rights, however, the government has set up a group which includes NGOs to help monitor progress on achieving the goals of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The government has made progress towards devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Regional development agencies are also planned in England, but fairly tight financial control of local authorities is still maintained.

¹ R. Lister, address to conference on equality and the democratic state, Vancouver, November 1998.

Power over resources for social regeneration may be devolved to some local communities.² In some areas (especially crime), ministers tend to perceive the views of NGOs as not reflecting the real concerns of local communities.³

Proposed legal reforms to decision-making and appeals in social security and asylum/immigration, and availability of legal aid, affect important policy areas for disadvantaged groups. Although some changes are positive, others have been criticised for sacrificing fairness and individual rights to speed; and measures to tackle 'anti-social behaviour' are seen as draconian by some.

«WE COMMIT OURSELVES TO THE GOAL OF ERADICATING POVERTY IN THE WORLD...»

The Prime Minister says the government should be judged on whether it improves the living standards of the poorest.⁴ The government also highlights «social exclusion», seen as dynamic and multi-dimensional. It set up a social exclusion unit in the Cabinet Office, which can take a cross-departmental approach. The unit is tackling specific issues, and investigating indicators of social exclusion. But its direct communication with people in poverty is rather unstructured; and outside organisations are consulted, not involved as co-participants.

The government has not drawn up a national anti-poverty strategy with goals and targets. However, the Prime Minister describes government policies as an anti-poverty strategy in action, which includes: cutting unemployment; tackling low pay; getting benefits to people in need; education, to prevent future poverty; regeneration of the poorest neighbourhoods; getting public services to people in need; and bringing in new allies as partners.⁵ **He has promised an annual progress report.** The government is also investigating the exclusion of low-income people from financial services and the withdrawal of shops from poor areas. But one commentator suggests between 350 thousand and 1.95 million more people could be in poverty (on under half average income) by 2002, depending on government policies and unemployment levels.⁶

Poverty has become more concentrated in small areas. Funds are being released from local authority housing sales for reinvestment, and a series of area-based programmes is targeted at disadvantaged neighbourhoods. But these areas often have to compete with one another in bids for additional resources.

The government embarked on «welfare reform», widely interpreted as meaning reductions in social security spending. Following opposition to benefit cuts for lone parents, and protests about threatened cuts for disabled people, the government is now proceeding more cautiously, with increases in benefits for specific groups. But most benefits will probably increase only in line with prices, not rising prosperity.

The government says tackling the root causes of poverty means focusing on opportunities, especially education and employment. This approach has been welcomed—but criticised for under-emphasising low income, and over-emphasising paid work rather than unpaid caring.

The government has fulfilled its manifesto commitment to reverse the decline in spending on overseas aid, and made encouraging statements on the need to tackle the debt burden. Its creation of a separate department for international development, and Cabinet status for the minister, moved international poverty up the policy agenda. Its policy on development includes a clear focus on poverty, which is consistent across departments.⁷ But on trade and investment issues, it could give more emphasis to the extent to which globalisation creates «losers», and to poverty as an issue to be tackled internationally.

«WE COMMIT OURSELVES TO PROMOTING THE GOAL OF FULL EMPLOYMENT...»

A government aim is «full employment for the 21st century».⁸ But the emphasis is on employability and other supply side factors, not direct job creation; and the Bank of England's control over interest rates is seen as prioritising controlling inflation over reducing unemployment.

«New Deals» have been set up for young and long-term

² Social Exclusion Unit. 1998. *Bringing Britain together: A national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*. The Stationery Office.

³ Eg, see article by Home Secretary. *The Times*, 8 April 1998.

⁴ Speech by Prime Minister. *The Independent*, 8 December 1997.

⁵ Speech by Prime Minister. 30 January 1998.

⁶ D. Piachaud. «The prospects for poverty». *New Economy, spring 1998*. Blackwell Publishers Journals.

⁷ Department for International Development. 1998. White Paper, *Eliminating world poverty: A challenge for the 21st century*. The Stationery Office.

⁸ The Chancellor. *The Times*, 29 September 1997.

unemployed people, lone parents and disabled people. They include temporary job subsidies, work experience, education/training and personal advice. They have been broadly welcomed, though critics point to the disproportionate share of resources for the young unemployed, the one-off nature of the funding, and compulsion (with potential loss of benefit) for young people.

There is concern about the low quality of «entry level» jobs for unemployed people, who often do not progress to better employment;⁹ marginal jobs are not a route to social inclusion.¹⁰ The government signed the European Social Chapter, but has made clear it will not support all proposals for more regulation. Rights at work, including union recognition and employment protection, are to be improved.¹¹

Another goal is to «make work pay». A statutory minimum wage will be introduced, benefiting some 1.5 million workers.¹² But unions criticise its inadequate level, and in particular the lower rate for young workers. There will also be reductions in national insurance contributions for low-paid workers and their employers.

«...TO PROMOTING SOCIAL INTEGRATION BY FOSTERING SOCIETIES THAT ARE STABLE, SAFE AND JUST...»

The government created a Race Relations Forum, to give ethnic minority communities more direct access to it, and is consulting on anti-discrimination action.

Asylum and immigration policy and practice are now less secretive. But the government's use of detention has been strongly criticised; and proposed policy changes include abolishing asylum-seekers' rights to cash benefits and choice over housing location, and curtailing appeal rights.¹³ This is in line with proposals for more restrictive policies towards refugees in the European Union

as a whole.

One in four ethnic minority electors has not registered to vote.¹⁴ Turn-out rates for black Africans and black Caribbeans in the general election were lower than for other groups,¹⁵ reflecting political alienation. New measures give additional powers to tackle racial incidents; but police treatment of black people is repeatedly criticised.

The government inherited anti-discrimination disability legislation widely perceived as ineffective. It is tightening up the provisions; but many disabled employees will still be unprotected, due to small company exemptions.

«...TO PROMOTING FULL RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIGNITY AND TO ACHIEVING EQUALITY AND EQUITY...»

The government set up a «women's unit», which has now moved to the Cabinet Office. A minister for women was appointed (**unpaid**). Mainstreaming of gender issues was promised, but policy guidance to departments has not yet been published. The government's priorities are child care, family-friendly employment policies and violence against women. Women make up only 18% of MPs and 31% of public appointments;¹⁶ «quangos»¹⁷ are to have a target of 50% women.

Women still receive only half men's average weekly income.¹⁸ Government proposals would improve maternity provision, and introduce paternity and parental/family leave¹⁹ –although unpaid leave may have limited value. The UK signed an EU directive improving part-timers' employment rights. Whilst the government is making progress, the Equal Opportunities Commission has called for a «super-law» to overhaul and update sex equality legislation.

«...UNIVERSAL AND EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION»

9 M. White and J. Forth. 1998. *Pathways through unemployment: The effects of a flexible labour market*. York Publishing Services Ltd. for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

10 T. Atkinson and J. Hills (eds.). 1998. *Exclusion, employment and opportunity*. CASE Paper 4, London School of Economics.

11 Department of Trade and Industry. 1998. White Paper, *Fairness at work*. The Stationery Office.

12 Institute for Fiscal Studies press release, 5 June 1998.

13 Home Office. 1998. White Paper, *Fairer, faster and firmer: A modern approach to immigration and asylum*. The Stationery Office.

14 Research by M. Anwar. 1998. Commissioned by Operation Black Vote.

15 S. Saggat. 1998. *Ethnic minorities and electoral politics*. Commission for Racial Equality.

16 *Equality Indicators*. 1997. Equal Opportunities Commission.

17 «Quangos» are quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations.

18 *Income and Personal Finance*. 1997. Equal Opportunities Commission.

19 Department for Trade and Industry. 1998. White Paper, *Fairness at work*. The Stationery Office.

The government has put high priority on education, from nursery schools to higher education. Primary schools must prioritise literacy and numeracy, and targets have been set to cut truancy and school exclusions by a third by 2002.²⁰ Twenty-five «education action zones» are being created in deprived areas to experiment with different approaches. The government emphasises «life-long learning», and a working group is to tackle poor basic skills among adults.

Proposals to finance a means-tested staying-on allowance for teenagers by abolishing universal child benefit for this age-group are controversial. Tuition fees are being introduced for higher education for the first time. Some commentators say anti-poverty measures would be more effective for children from low-income families than the current emphasis on raising «standards».²¹

«...TO PROMOTING THE HIGHEST ATTAINABLE STANDARD OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH...»

The government launched an inquiry into health inequalities. Other policy areas are now recognised as influencing health status of the population. Twenty-six «health action zones» are being created, to improve the health of the poorest. The social exclusion unit will investigate teenage pregnancies, which are higher in poor

areas.

The influence of the internal market in the health service is being reduced. Ethnic minority groups' access to health care is being investigated. But fewer low-income individuals visit doctors and dentists regularly than five years ago.²²

The health divide between rich and poor has widened over recent years.²³ Many commentators welcome the government's policies—but say there is still a long way to go.

«WE COMMIT OURSELVES TO AN IMPROVED AND STRENGTHENED FRAMEWORK FOR INTERNATIONAL, REGIONAL AND SUB-REGIONAL CO-OPERATION...»

The government has not publicised the Copenhagen commitments relating to the UK, nor organised monitoring with outside organisations. Its anti-poverty goals have not publicly been linked with the Social Development Summit.

- UK Coalition Against Poverty

²⁰ Social Exclusion Unit. 1998. *Truancy and school exclusion*. Cabinet Office.

²¹ P. Robinson. 1997. *Literacy, numeracy and economic performance*. London School of Economics, 1997; I. Plewis. «Inequalities, targets and zones», *New Economy*, 5(2), 1998.

²² National Consumer Council. 1998. *Consumer concerns 1998: A consumer view of the health services*.

²³ Office for National Statistics. 1997. *Health inequalities: Decennial supplement*. The Stationery Office.