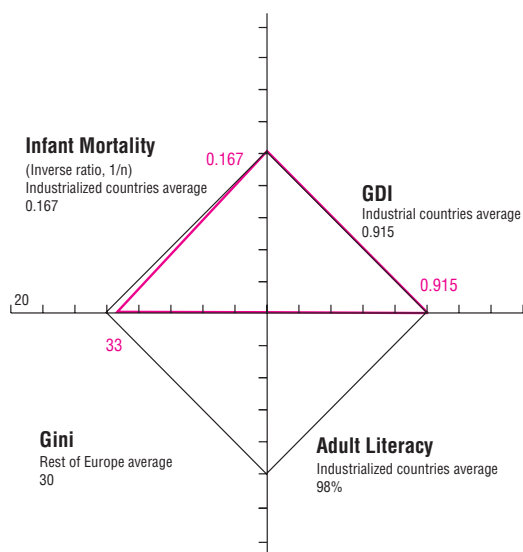


•FRAN BENNETT

FACTS POLICY



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*).

Commitment 1: We commit ourselves to creating an economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment that will enable people to achieve social development.

The UK government has reformed legislation on civil and political rights and access to information, democratic processes, and its own ways of working. The Human Rights Act, incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights (primarily civil and

political rights) into British law, comes into force in October 2000; Scotland and Wales must abide by it now. A Freedom of Information Bill is being debated, and equivalent measures in Scotland give greater public access. The UK has signed but not yet ratified the Council of Europe's revised Social Charter.

Significant powers have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament and to Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland; less powerful regional development agencies have been created in England. Local authorities are being given a general power to promote the well-being of their populations, and they must consult communities more systematically. The House of Lords is being reformed, with hereditary peers losing voting rights. **The government emphasises evidence-based policy-making, 'joined-up thinking' and cross-departmental working; but its anti-poverty objectives are not integrated into its strategy for revitalising democracy.**

More emphasis is laid on value for money in legal aid (financial help with legal claims), and on alternative methods of resolving disputes. Powers to issue 'anti-social behaviour' orders and impose child curfews were introduced, but they are not widely used. Proposals to abolish many defendants' rights to trial by jury are being debated.

Commitment 2: We commit ourselves to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international co-operation, as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind.

The 1999 UN Human Development Report identifies the UK as third worst out of 17 industrialised nations for its record on poverty and for combining high levels of poverty and inequality.¹ One in four people (some 14 million) lived in households below half average income after housing costs in 1997/8.²

The government says tackling poverty is a high priority, and new official measures of changes in quality of life include poverty indicators. Government commitments to eliminating child poverty within 20 years,³ and halving it within 10 years,⁴ have been widely

1 United Nations. *Human Development Report, 1999*.

2 DSS. *Households Below Average Income – 1994/5 to 1997/8*. Corporate Document Services, 1999. (More recent figures are not yet available.)

3 Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister, Beveridge lecture. Toynbee Hall, March 18 1999.

4 Pre-Budget Report. HM Treasury, November 1999.

welcomed. The Treasury has produced analyses of inequality and lifetime disadvantage and often leads on policy.⁵ **The government's first annual report on poverty and social exclusion analysed the problem as complex and multi-dimensional, described government policies, and listed 32 indicators of progress (though it often suggested reductions/improvements rather than time-bound targets).**⁶ **The report was seen as a significant step forward. Policies are not yet consistently 'poverty-proofed', however, and there are no formal mechanisms for involving people in poverty or their organisations in developing an anti-poverty strategy.**

The government says that by the next election its measures will mean 1.25 million fewer people (including 800,000 children) living in poverty.⁷ The three Labour government budgets have been modestly redistributive, with the bottom and second deciles gaining more than the average,⁸ but more radical action may be necessary as social and economic inequalities persist.⁹

The Social Exclusion Unit, set up in the Cabinet Office to take a cross-departmental approach, is producing a strategy for neighbourhood renewal, building on the work of 18 policy action teams.¹⁰ Strategies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland focus on creating an inclusive society (rather than combating social exclusion), and in Scotland involvement of voluntary and community organisations is more structured.

Many policies are implemented through area-based pilots, although the relative importance of area-based action and national level policies is debated.¹¹ There is now more emphasis in local projects on investing in people and involving communities; but time-scales are still often unrealistic, and competitive bidding may be damaging. The index measuring local deprivation is being revised.

The government's aims for welfare reform are modernisation, reorienting welfare around (paid) work, and reducing the bills for economic failure. Claimants' responsibilities are emphasised more than rights. Cuts to benefits for lone parents and disabled people were vigorously opposed: Benefits have now been increased for some groups, especially severely disabled people, low-income pensioners, and families with children, with additional increases for low-income families, especially with younger children.

The government says tackling poverty means focusing on opportunities (especially in education and employment). This approach is broadly welcomed, especially for its focus on causes

rather than symptoms, but it is also criticised for under-emphasising low income and over-emphasising paid work relative to unpaid caring and community work. There has been no commitment to assessing overall benefit adequacy. Most benefits will increase only with prices, meaning that claimants will not share automatically in improvements in living standards.

Commitment 3: We commit ourselves to promoting the goal of full employment as a basic priority of our economic and social policies, and to enabling all men and women to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods through freely chosen productive employment and work.

The government prioritises increasing employment opportunities for unemployed people and others in 'workless households', with the emphasis on improving employability and work incentives rather than direct job creation. There is concern over a geographical mismatch between workless people and available jobs.

'New Deals' were set up for young and long-term unemployed people, the over-50s, lone parents and disabled people, with funding from a 'windfall tax' on privatised utilities. They include temporary job subsidies, work experience, education/training and personal advice. They have been widely welcomed, though there is concern about increasing compulsion (with potential loss of benefit for six months). A work-related interview will soon be a condition of benefit receipt for most working age claimants. Employment Zones will experiment with using benefit funds more flexibly.

There is concern about the quality and sustainability of many 'entry level' jobs, and research revealed high levels of employment insecurity.¹² Rights at work, including union recognition and employment protection, were improved in the Employment Relations Act. The government also signed the European Union Social Chapter.

Another goal is to 'make work pay'. A national minimum wage was introduced for the first time in April 1999. It benefited 1.7–2.1 million workers, especially women,¹³ and was welcomed by unions and many employers. Some argue that it is too low, especially the lower rate for young workers, and it is not yet clear if it will be increased in 2000. National insurance contributions for low-paid workers and their employers were reduced. The working families tax credit (usually paid through the wage-packet) is a more

5 See, for example, HM Treasury. *Tackling Poverty and Extending Opportunity*, 1999.

6 Department of Social Security. *Opportunity for All: Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion*. Cm 4445, The Stationery Office, 1999.

7 See note 5.

8 David Piachaud. Address to Social Policy Association conference, July 1999; analysis of Budgets by Cambridge Microsimulation Unit.

9 For one judgment about future trends, see Richard Scase. *Britain Towards 2010: the Changing Business Environment*. Economic and Social Research Council/Foresight (Department of Trade and Industry), 1999.

10 Social Exclusion Unit. *Bringing Britain Together: a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*. Cm 4045, The Stationery Office, 1998.

11 Mark Kleinman. *New Economy*. Institute for Public Policy Research, winter 1999. (Some areas may be quite small, and more poor people live outside poor areas than inside them.)

12 B.J. Burchell *et al.* *Job Insecurity and Work Intensification: Flexibility and the Changing Boundaries of Work*. York Publishing Services Ltd. for Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1999.

13 *Labour Market Trends, December 1998*. Office for National Statistics.

generous replacement for means-tested family credit for low-paid workers with children; tax credits may be extended to all low-income workers in the longer term.

Commitment 4: We commit ourselves to promoting social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons.

The government ratified the International Labour Office convention on discrimination in employment. It rejected the Commission for Racial Equality's recommendations for stronger race relations legislation. A Bill extends the Race Relations Act to more functions of public authorities, including law enforcement and immigration.

The government describes its Immigration and Asylum Act as creating a 'fairer, faster and firmer' approach. But most asylum-seekers will have to survive on inadequate support provided largely through vouchers, with no choice of accommodation or location. Asylum and immigration issues are increasingly decided at EU level.

The government inherited anti-discrimination disability legislation widely perceived as insufficient. It is tightening up the provisions, leading a campaign for positive images of disabled people, and creating a Disability Rights Commission; but many disabled employees will still be unprotected, due to small company exemptions.

Commitment 5: We commit ourselves to promoting full respect for human dignity and to achieving equality and equity between women and men, and to recognising and enhancing the participation and leadership roles of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life and in development.

The government set up a 'women's unit' (now in the Cabinet Office), appointed a minister for women and carried out a 'listening to women' exercise—but rejected the Equal Opportunities Commission's proposals for a 'super-law' to update and improve sex equality legislation. Mainstreaming of gender issues was promised and guidance was issued, but only one department routinely examines how its policies affect women.¹⁴ Targets were set for appointing women to civil service posts and public bodies.

The gap between men's and women's (full-time) pay narrowed in 1998—by one per cent, to nineteen per cent.¹⁵ The government

developed a national childcare strategy (partly financed by the Lottery), and a childcare tax credit (covering registered childcare, for low- and middle-income families). Maternity leave is being lengthened, and maternity allowance extended to low-paid women. Parental and family leave is being introduced, but parental leave will be unpaid, so many low-paid workers are unlikely to take it. The UK signed an EU directive improving part-time workers' rights.

Commitment 6A: We commit ourselves to promoting and attaining the goals of universal and equitable access to quality education.

Education is a priority for the government. Primary schools must prioritise literacy and numeracy to improve educational standards. Truancy and school exclusions should be reduced;¹⁶ parents whose children persistently truant will be fined more. 'Education action zones' in deprived areas will experiment with different approaches. There is concern about selection and private sector involvement.

Means-tested allowances for older teenagers staying at school and schemes addressing disaffection amongst older pupils are being piloted. A strategy for training and education of post 16-year-olds, including life-long learning for adults, was published; the functional illiteracy rate is high, and innumeracy is also a serious problem. Tuition fees were introduced for higher education.

Some commentators say anti-poverty measures would be more effective than raising overall standards in redressing educational inequalities;¹⁷ but the government points to its programme of pre-school help in deprived areas (Sure Start), which addresses the developmental gap between poorer children and others.¹⁸

Commitment 6B: We commit ourselves to promoting the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and the access of all to primary health care, making particular efforts to rectify inequalities relating to social conditions and without distinction as to race, national origin, gender, age or disability.

The health divide between rich and poor has widened.¹⁹ The government published a White Paper on public health, and an independent inquiry into health inequalities recommended '39 steps to a healthier society', including benefit increases.²⁰ 'Health action zones' aim to improve the health of the poorest, and healthy living centres will experiment with new approaches. The UK's teenage pregnancy rate is amongst the highest in Europe, and the Social Exclusion Unit proposed halving teenage pregnancies within ten years.²¹

14 House of Commons. *Hansard*. Written Answers. March 3 1999, col. 741; *The Times*. September 17 1999. (The department in question is the Department for International Development.)

15 New Earnings Survey. 1999; Department for Education and Employment press release. October 14 1999.

16 Social Exclusion Unit. *Truancy and School Exclusion*. Cabinet Office, 1998.

17 Peter Robinson. *Literacy, Numeracy and Economic Performance*. London School of Economics, 1997.

18 See note 5.

19 Office for National Statistics. *Health Inequalities: Decennial Supplement*. The Stationery Office, 1997.

20 Department of Health. *Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health*. The Stationery Office, 1999.

21 Social Exclusion Unit. *Teenage Pregnancy*. Cm 4342, The Stationery Office, 1999.

The means-tested maternity grant was doubled but made conditional. Free eye tests were reintroduced for pensioners, and plans were announced to tackle problems of access to NHS dentists. The 'internal market' in health care has been abolished.

Commitment 9: We commit ourselves to increasing significantly and/or utilising more efficiently the resources allocated to social development in order to achieve the goals of the Summit through national action and regional and international co-operation.

The government has committed an extra £40 billion over three years to education and health—but these figures are being challenged, and one commentator says it will spend relatively less than any government for 40 years.²² A major debate is about how to 'square the circle' of rising public expectations and perceived unwillingness to fund better services via taxation. Whilst this analysis is contested, it currently defines the political limits to policy options. The government introduced a new 10p tax rate, is cutting the basic income tax rate and will not increase tax rates, but it has

made the tax system more progressive in other ways. Critics say 'redistribution by stealth' cannot create a constituency of support for longer-term change.

Commitment 10: We commit ourselves to an improved and strengthened framework for international, regional and sub-regional co-operation for social development, in a spirit of partnership, through the United Nations and other multilateral institutions.

The government has not publicised the Copenhagen commitments or organised monitoring with outside organisations, although the UK report includes domestic and development issues.²³ The government agreed to mark October 17th (the UN day for the eradication of poverty) as a UK event in 2000.

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²² Tony Travers. *The Guardian*. August 25 1999.

²³ At the time of writing, the UK government's report was not available.