2. INDEPENDENCE, NOT INCLUSION
A liberal approach to disadvantage

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Liberals, conservatives and social democrats can all agree the provision of extra support for severely disadvantaged groups makes fiscal sense. But the different political traditions will bring different emphases to policymaking. For liberals, the overall measure of success is not the degree to which a deeply disadvantaged individual or family becomes 'included' in society; it is the degree to which they have the resources and opportunities to chart their own course in life, rather than living at the mercy of others, or in the grip of addiction.

There is surely no policy area so replete with synonyms, euphemisms and labels as this one. Depending on the context and political flavour of the times, we might read about the 'socially excluded', 'people with multiple needs', 'troubled families', the 'hard to help', or 'disconnected' - or perhaps people who are 'vulnerable', lead 'chaotic lives'. Sometimes people are even described as 'poor'.

What is clear is that we are not simply talking about people who are poor only in the sense of having an income below a certain line. This is poverty in a constellation of domains – health, education, employment, crime, housing, neighbourhood, income, drug use, family stability, or some combination of these: a cocktail of social and economic

problems combining in one individual, one family, or one community.

It is important not to get hung up on semantics, however. By and large we know who we are talking about. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of an unequal society is the clustering of different kinds of disadvantage in a particular social space, including an individual. This is in fact the central insight of *Disadvantage*, one of the most important books on the topic, by Jonathan Wolff and Avner De-Shalit. While equality in any given domain is unachievable, and indeed in many cases even undesirable, Wolff and De-Shalit suggest a fair society is one in which disadvantage is 'declustered', rather than being concentrated on particular people or families.

The group with which this volume is concerned are the super-clusters of disadvantage, those in the lower reaches of the socio-economic gradient on most indexes of opportunity, functioning or wellbeing. This is also a group for whom the various measures of disadvantage tend to be stable over time: on the dimension of income poverty, for example, they fall into the group who are poor for ten years in each decade, rather than for one or two.

One distinction is worth making, however, and not least because politicians too often fail to make it themselves: this group is difficult to pin down. Take the term 'troubled families': while the current government continues to use the figure of 120,000, the definition has in fact been changed quite radically. Frankly, the number is now a mythical one, and everyone knows it.

The substantive point for our social policy is that there are families who are in trouble, and there are families causing trouble. We cannot simply assume they are the same. While the political rhetoric still tends to be of the 'neighbours from hell' flavour, the latest definition of a 'troubled family' points in the other direction. To qualify as 'troubled', a family has to

suffer from at least five of the following seven disadvantages: a) no parent in work b) poor quality housing, c) no parent with qualifications, d) mother with mental health problems, e) one parent with longstanding disability/illness, f) family has low income, g) cannot afford some food/clothing items. The Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) definition of an individual facing multiple needs is not dissimilar – people have to face a combination of problems, have ineffective contact with services, and be living 'chaotic lives.' There is nothing direct here about anti-social behaviour, or crime, or drugs, or truancy. These problems are often associated with the disadvantages in the qualifying list, of course, but it is important to note that they are not the explicit target of policy. 'Troubled' families are not the neighbours from hell; they are the neighbours in hell.

The goal of this government's policy is to 'turn around' all the 'troubled families' in the nation. Louise Casey, a three-PM veteran of policy in this area, has been given half a billion pounds and considerable power, exercised through dedicated co-ordinators (for one horrible moment it looked like they were going to be called 'controllers'). Each co-ordinator, typically a social worker by training, works with families through a Family Intervention Project providing 'intensive, practical support to whole families'.

This is broadly the right approach: historically, one of the problems has been an overlapping matrix of agencies working in different ways with different members of the family at different times.

It is worth noting at this point, that *individuals* with multiple needs have of course also historically faced the same problem. However, despite the similarities, and despite the fact that many individuals with multiple needs – the homeless person, the repeat offender – are part of family units, there is currently no governmental commitment to support individuals with

multiple needs in the same way as 'troubled families'. So what are the political issues at stake here? How will liberals, conservatives and social democrats approach the problem of deeply disadvantaged families and individuals?

Let's start where we can all agree. The provision of extra support for these groups makes fiscal sense: any improvements in the trajectories of the individuals and families in question results in significant savings in drug and alcohol treatment, criminal justice, welfare payments, and so on.

But the different political traditions will bring different emphases to policymaking, and in particular to the measure of success. Conservatives focus on preventing spillover effects to the rest of society, either directly in communities or indirectly as recipients of tax-funded welfare. The focus here is getting these families and individuals to adopt the norms of mainstream society. Morality, behaviour, respect for others, playing by the rules, individual and parental responsibility: these are the conservative leitmotifs. It's a deficit-based approach to disadvantage.

The orientation of social democrats is tackling resource deficits rather than moral shortcomings. The language of 'inclusion' is shorthand for people sharing similar life chances as the mainstream, with the resources to 'participate in society'. The problem, for the left-leaning policymaker, is that these individuals and families lack money, skills and hope. Opportunity, skill-building, self-respect are the focuses in this strengths-based approach.

Liberals bring a different perspective to bear. We agree that there are families and individuals in trouble, many of whom also cause trouble: though we rather insist on the distinction. We also agree that the state has a role to play in helping – a laissez-faire approach would suit a libertarian, but not a liberal.

There are three principles underpinning a liberal approach to deeply disadvantaged families and individuals.

1. Put children first

Institutions can fail individuals, and families are no exception. Since the liberal focus is on individual opportunities and flourishing, we will be harder-headed about the importance of the individual, including the distinction between parents and children.

Bluntly, for many children, their parents are the main problem. Even if they are not abusive, they are neglectful, disorganised, inconsistent and uninvolved. While we have a duty to help the parents, we also need to ensure that we do not fail the children by placing family autonomy above individual opportunity.

The key success measure for family interventions is decoupling the life chances of the child from the life circumstances of the parent. So, more pre-school (which the government, thanks to Nick Clegg, is extending to poorer two year-olds); longer school days; summer schools (Clegg again); more resources to the most disadvantaged through an enhanced pupil premium; and ideas such as the SEED boarding schools in the United States, which provide 24-hour education, care and tutoring from Monday to Friday for children from the poorest homes, should be considered.

But in some extreme cases, physical separation of the child from the parent is the most liberal move. I believe that political or moral discomfort with the very idea of the state as parent, has led to chronic underinvestment in this vital area of provision. The quality of state care is therefore shockingly, absurdly, immorally low to the extent that it is often a significant factor in causing, rather than solving, disadvantage in today's society. Given the problems in the care system, the

state is now too reluctant to take children into care. A liberal sees unflinchingly that, in extremis, the state is absolutely the best parent, but needs to get good at it, and fast.

2. Pay respect to the recipients of state assistance

Casey's coordinators – and those working with people facing multiple needs - work alongside families and individuals, not above them. Again, this is the right approach. While frustrated politicians often demand more 'respect' from disadvantaged groups, this cuts both ways: they are worthy of respect too. Because of the political confusion between 'in trouble' and 'causing trouble', an important division of labour can be lost. Crimes must be punished. But the role of the co-ordinators is the opposite of punitive. As Casey herself, in a rare personal moment, said last year, "what's missing here is love".

Like civic republicans, liberals seek a society in which people can look each other in the eye. As the philosopher Ronald Dworkin puts it:

> "A relational, or social, view of equality takes the task of an egalitarian society to be not so much to distribute goods in the right way, but to create the right kinds of classless relationships between people; avoiding oppression, exploitation, domination, servility, snobbery, and other hierarchical evils."

Respect of all kinds is built on self-respect. It is therefore vital that all services, assistance and support are offered in a spirit of respect for the recipient. Here the tone set by politicians is important too: if we continue to stigmatise 'troubled families' and people with multiple needs, we should not be surprised if social attitudes towards them

harden, which will have the effect of pushing them further away.

3. Focus on independence rather than inclusion

The overall measure of success therefore is not the degree to which a deeply disadvantaged individual or family becomes 'included' in society; it is the degree to which they have the resources and opportunities – the 'capability set', to borrow Amartya Sen's terms – to chart their own course in life, to be agents over their own lives, rather than living at the mercy of others, or in the grip of addiction.

Being independent does not mean going without state support, or being, in a tellingly paternalist phrase, 'weaned off welfare'. It means being in deliberate pursuit of a life plan, constructed according to your own values and ambitions. The role of the state is not to make people into model citizens, defined somewhere in Whitehall. The role of the state – especially with regard to children and vulnerable adults – is to ensure the provision of real opportunities, and respect for their independent choices.

To say that 'independence' is hard to measure is an understatement, though perhaps no more so than 'troubled' or 'included' or 'disadvantaged'. But it is the clear goal for liberal policy.

An example illustrates the distinction between inclusion and independence. It is not known how many Roma live in the UK; estimates range from 200,000 to 300,000. But the 2011 Census included a new category for 'gypsy or Irish traveller', and 58,000 people placed themselves in this category. I do not know how many 'troubled' families are travellers, but it seems very few. When Casey chose to interview 16 families to show the range of problems they face, not a single one had a Roma or traveller background.

Most travellers and Roma have life ambitions and personal values that depart from the societal norm. In a sense, this is none of our business. If we are confident that the state is offering the goods and services in line with the rights of citizens, including children, then we must respect the rights of traveller families to live differently. They are not 'included', but they are independent.

In the end, a society in which everyone was included in a mainstream way of life would be a dull one, lacking the diversity and friction of a liberal culture. 'Turning troubled families around' or supporting 'people with multiple needs' must only ever mean helping to set them on their own, independent path, free to pursue their own version of a good life, whatever that turns out to be.