

Child Poverty

Transcript of remarks by Ed Miliband MP, Minister for the Third Sector, to the Barnardo's annual conference

20 March 2007

It is a great pleasure to be here and I want to thank Martin very much for the invitation. This is the first Barnardo's annual conference, I think I am right in saying, and it is pretty humbling for me to be the first speaker. I think it is great that Martin is now heading up Barnardo's – he has a very distinguished record, having been the head of the Prison Service, and also because he was recently elected Chair of the End Child Poverty Coalition, which I think is an incredibly important role. It is also a great pleasure to be on the platform with Polly Toynbee.

I am here to have a discussion, really, about the issues we face in relation to child poverty and child outcomes. I think my commission for this event was to talk about the role of the Office of the Third Sector in relation to child outcomes. I want to say three things.

First of all, I want to talk about the context that I see for child outcomes. In particular, those highlighted by the recent Unicef report.

Secondly, I want to talk about the way I think government and third sector, the voluntary sector, need to work together to tackle some of the outcomes that we expect.

Thirdly, I want to really come back to the challenges raised by Unicef and how we tackle them going forward.

Unicef report

Let me start by talking about the Unicef report, which some of you will have seen. It compared child outcome across the world, and Britain didn't fair very well. Now, we can say some of the ways that they calculated those figures, or the way they weighted the figures, aren't necessarily right. But I actually don't think that is the relevant point. I basically think what the Unicef report shows – and this is right – is that there is a huge long way to go in achieving the outcomes for children that we would want to see as part of a decent society.

So let me just pick out three examples from the Unicef report.

First of all, income deprivation. The figures there do not take full account of the fact that child poverty has fallen by 700,000 since 1997. Nevertheless, it indicates that 3.4 million children live in poverty and there is a long way to go in tackling the issues that this raises.

Secondly, on education it raises the issue, rightly in my view, about staying on rates in education. Our staying on rates in education are still some of the worst in the OECD – I think something like 75 per cent. Again, we are very well down the league on that.

Then thirdly, and in a way the thing I found most disturbing about the Unicef report – and Al Aynsley-Green is also with us on the platform and I think he has talked about these issues – is the issue of peer relationships between young people and between children. When you ask children across the world, “are you likely to find your peers kind and helpful?”, Britain comes bottom of the league, a long way behind many other countries.

So, Unicef paints the picture of how far we have to go.

Responding to Unicef

You could then respond to that by saying ‘well look, we have had 10 years of a Labour Government, this shows nothing has changed, there has been no progress’. I don't agree with that – you might not expect me to agree with it, and I don't.

Let's just take what I said about child poverty. The fall in child poverty is short of the target we set ourselves, it's true. However, the Institute of Fiscal Studies, a respected independent body, have said that this is the longest sustained fall in child poverty since records began in 1961. So it is progress, but there is a lot further to go.

Take education, where educational standards have been going up, partly as a result of more teachers and more investment in school buildings. Again, there is much further to go.

The other thing to say is that some of the investments we have made are long-term investments, like Sure Start. Those investments are not going to show up in the Unicef figures straightaway.

What I don't take out of this report is there is nothing government can do, there is nothing we all can do. What I do take out of it is that we need to think about what government can do, and what the voluntary sector can do together with government.

Now some people talk about this relationship and they say 'what we need is less of government, government to play less of a role, and we the voluntary sector to substitute for it'. I think that fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between government and the voluntary sector. Government has a role in funding services, which is necessary, and which only it can do. Government has a role in providing accountability, which only it can do.

But, and this is an important point, I have also said we know, looking around the country, that the voluntary sector can do things that government cannot do.

The third sector

Let me just say three things about where I think the sector has a big role going forwards.

First of all, the way in which the voluntary sector can reach out to the hardest to help in a way that government often cannot. This came over to me during the course of my job when I met someone who had been helped by a drug charity called Multiple Choice in Leeds. What he said to me was, "before Multiple Choice everyone else had told me they would solve my problem. They were the first to convince me I had the resources to solve my problem". In a way, I think that is about the way in which voluntary sector organisations have an ability to show a sense of respect and equality with the people that they help. Voluntary sector organisations convince the people that they help that they have the resources to help solve the problems that they face.

I think the public sector should be better at emulating some of those characteristics, but I do think it is a characteristic that is particularly shown by the voluntary sector.

What does that lead me to? It leads me to think that the sector has a role in helping to deliver services in a whole range of areas. What it doesn't lead me to think is that the government should then be able to walk away, deliver services on the cheap, and think we don't need to be involved.

So the role in service delivery is important.

But the second thing, which I think is equally important about the sector, is its ability to campaign and make change happen. In this area, more than any other in a way, we need that to happen.

If you think about lots of the changes that have happened in the last 10 years, whether it is Make Poverty History, whether it has been gay and lesbian rights, through the campaigning of Stonewall, whether it is disability discrimination – lots of those changes that have happened, have been because the voluntary sector organisations have demanded that the changes happen.

So that campaigning role it seems to me is absolutely fundamental for what the sector does. And it is a role that I think government needs to be better, in a way, at upholding and supporting. There is no – and Martin wrote this in the Guardian – there is no contradiction between that service delivery role that I talked about, and the campaigning role that the sector carries out. I want to come back in a minute and talk about how I see that role in relation to child poverty.

The third area, and again I see this as a local Member of Parliament in the North of England, in Doncaster, is in building local networks, local civil society. One of the things that struck me during the course of the Review we are doing into the situation of the voluntary sector is that the smallest organisations need small amounts of funding to be able to do what they do best. We are thinking about the way we can help strengthen those organisations on the ground. Lots of local authorities are moving towards more service delivery, more contracts with voluntary sector organisations. It is fine to use organisations to help deliver services where that is appropriate for them, but it means we must never forget the smallest organisations that are never going to be in the business of big service delivery, but need more grants in order to do the great things that they do at a grass roots level.

So I see the sector as having a broad role, not a narrow role. I don't think it is just about service delivery. I think it is about yes, helping services, but it is also about campaigning, and it is about building networks.

I also think we shouldn't see the sector and the state as replacements, we should see them hopefully as allies, with the state fulfilling its role to fund public services and be accountable and the sector fulfilling its role.

Responding to the challenges of Unicef

Now what does that mean for the purpose of the Unicef report? Let me go back to those three issues of education, peer relationships and child poverty.

In education, we are seeing a role for the sector in relation to trust schools and academies. But I think the biggest role for the sector in this area, if we are talking about service delivery, is outside school. So if you take childcare, it is the

new Childcare Act that gives priority to third sector organisations. If you take a lot of the work being done in Sure Start, there is an organisation here today called I CAN, which works on speech therapy and speech improvement for the youngest kids. They are showing how they can make an enormous difference to the way services are delivered on the ground.

And one of the things I think the public sector needs to be much better at is working with voluntary sector organisations and understanding how it can learn the lessons from what voluntary sector organisations are doing on the ground. In other words, we will often need to provide the funding to roll out what voluntary sector organisations are doing, but we need to be far more nimble and flexible at understanding those lessons. I talked a bit with I CAN and their experiences, trying hard to get their lessons of what they are doing in children's centres and elsewhere rolled out across the country.

So in the area of education, I think there is a huge role for the sector but I think government needs to be far better at working with you to understand the lessons and roll them out.

If you take peer-to-peer relationships, I think one of the biggest neglected issues in this country is about youth services. I don't think youth services are the full answer for youth peer to peer relationships, but I think it is a huge sleeper political issue. Every constituency I go to in the country, the issue of young people not having anywhere to go, and in a way not having that horizon expanded in the way that youth services can, is a very big issue. If you talk to any Member of Parliament, whether a Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat, they will say the same thing to you.

There is a truth behind it, which is that the biggest investment in youth services was 40 years ago at a time of the Albemarle report in the 1960s. We haven't properly invested in youth services since. Now we must not be too traditionalist about this. We need to fashion youth services in a way that young people actually want to use them.

Again, here I think the third sector is playing a big role up and down the country in showing in dynamic and different ways how young people can be helped and how we can tackle some of those issues.

Then the third issue is child poverty, which is the biggest issue of all. Polly and I have had conversations about this over the years: all of us haven't done a good enough job of building the constituency to tackle child poverty. Over the course of 10 years, yes the government has done a lot, but I think we need to be honest about this and say what we have done has not been because of popular pressure to take action. It has been because we have wanted to – and sometimes people have a hard time believing this – we wanted to do the right

thing. If we are going to tackle the huge mountain that we have to climb, we need to do a far better job at mobilising people to make this a real cause.

What are the elements of this?

First of all, we need long term commitment from government. The government needs to be prepared to invest the resources. I think Martin is going to talk about this a bit later on, but it is absolutely fundamental that the government needs to be willing to invest the resources that are necessary.

Secondly, I think we need to see the issue of child poverty in broader terms than we have traditionally seen it. It is about income, but it is also about services, it is also about opportunity, it is also about expectations. All those things matter and are important. There is not saying that income isn't important, but it is also to say that all these other issues are equally important and need equal focus. I sometimes think because we can measure income, sometimes we don't focus enough on the other issues which are equally important.

The third thing that we need it seems to me is to build a very big national campaign and mobilise. That is why I am very pleased that Martin has become Chair of the End Child Poverty Coalition, because that is the most important vehicle that we have for making this happen.

Now it is not for me to say how the voluntary sector should build this campaign, but I do have one thought about this, which is this. Why has 'Make Poverty History' succeeded? Why did it succeed in a way that a campaign about domestic child poverty has not, as yet? I think part of the reason for that is obviously that African poverty is so much more intense and so much more apparent and more extreme.

But I also think it is something to do with the fact that in relation to a domestic context, there is a sense in which people both live with people who are poor but don't live with them. In other words, there are people who are poor who are around them, but they don't know them. And in a sense, if you are going to build a campaign to tackle domestic child poverty, you have to find ways in which we bring people together so they really understand, not just what it is like to be in poverty, but get over some of the stereotypes that people often have.

We do not want to be an unequal society where people often do not mingle and do not meet, and we need to find a way to tackle this in all kinds of ways.

The reason I think this is important is not just because it will help the children who are in poverty, but because it starts to get over this issue of ignorance and indifference. I think that is absolutely important. If we can get out of this 35,000 advocates who are tackling child poverty, this will have been a very successful idea and very successful programme.

Another thing I want to say about this, is it says something wider about the kind of society we want to be. We want to be the kind of society where people do care about other people and people do have a sense of compassion for those in poverty and do have a sense of respect for them and an understanding of them.

Conclusion

Let me just end on one point about the Unicef report and what it shows.

The four countries that are top of the league tables are Denmark, The Netherlands, Sweden and Finland: all countries that see investment in children, not somehow as a drag on efficiency, but as an investment in the future of the country. It seems to me that for many policy priorities and many issues in this area, that is the fundamental point. We do need to have a much, much better national conversation about the priority we attach to investing in children, and the priority we attach to tackling child poverty. And the truth is that the government can play a role in it, but it can't achieve on its own.

And that really takes me to the final point about partnerships. We need the voluntary sector, we need all the forces in civil society that care about this issue, not just to work with us, but criticise us when it is right, and be part of a big campaign to help this happen, to generate – which has to be led in part by government – a national conversation about the priority attached to tackling child poverty and investment in children.

The thing I would say is that we shouldn't be down-hearted about this. Important things have been achieved over the last 10 years, and actually I genuinely believe in the progressive instincts of the British people. If we have this conversation with them, about the future of children in this country and the future of our society, I think it is a conversation that can be very productive, but also a battle that we can win to make the kind of investments we need.

Thank you very much.

(This is a slightly abridged transcript of the speech as delivered.)