

# Making policy in opposition: the Commission on Social Justice, 1992-1994

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## About the author

Dr Catherine Haddon is a professional historian whose doctoral dissertation was on Whitehall and Cold War defence. As well as working as an academic, she has been involved in research for a number of high profile publications, museum and corporate projects. In her work at the Institute, Catherine has published reports on *Reforming the Civil Service* and *Making Policy in Opposition*, as well as co-authoring the Institute's publications *Making Minority Government Work*, *Transitions: Preparing for Changes of Government* and *Transitions: Lessons Learned*. In addition to her continuing work on Institute projects relating to Whitehall, government, the political process and the Constitution, she is currently working on a major project on Civil Service history.

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# Timeline

- 9 April 1992:** Conservative Party wins general election by 336 seats to the Labour Party's 271
- 18 July 1992:** John Smith elected Leader of the Labour Party, replacing Neil Kinnock
- December 1992:** Smith announces the launch of the Commission on Social Justice
- July 1993:** Commission publishes two interim reports: *The Justice Gap* and *Social Justice in a Changing World*
- November 1993:** Commission publishes: *Social Insurance: Reform or Abolition* by Fran Bennett as the first of 13 issue papers
- 12 May 1994:** Smith dies of a heart attack at the age of 55. Margaret Beckett becomes interim party leader
- July 1994:** Commission on Social Justice publishes the last of its issue papers: *Act Local: Social Justice from the Bottom-up* by David Donnison
- 21 July 1994:** Tony Blair elected Leader of the Labour Party
- 24 October 1994:** Blair launches Commission's final report: *Social Justice: Strategies for National Renewal*
- 2 May 1997:** Labour Party wins general election by 419 seats to the Conservative Party's 165

# Introduction

When a new government takes office it brings two things with it to govern: people and policy. The Institute for Government has looked in the past at how well prepared people are for government and it has also examined how policy is made in government. This series of case studies seeks to add to the Institute's work on the policy making process by studying how policy is developed when a party is in opposition.

Policy making in opposition is not simply about replicating what occurs in government. It is also an intrinsic part of getting elected in the first place. Throughout their time in opposition, parties focus on how they challenge the government and on what issues, as much as on their plans for government. By the time of an election, party manifestoes will contain a range of positions from broad philosophy and values, through to specific pledges and commitments.

Policy making in opposition also involves vastly different resources to that in government. These case studies have been chosen to provide some insights into what sources of expertise, research and challenge parties have when developing policy in opposition. They build on the Institute's [previous case studies](#) examining a number of 'successful' policies, two of which were policies developed in opposition.<sup>1</sup> As such they do not attempt to fully analyse the policy itself or narrate (except where relevant to the opposition period) its progress within government. As case studies, they aim to provide a narrative of what happened, but do not pull out all of the analysis and lessons that can be drawn from them.

Some of the lessons from these studies are available in a short report, [Making Policy in Opposition: Lessons for Effective Government](#), published in September 2012. The Institute will continue to add to this and other policy making research.

# The Commission on Social Justice, 1992-1994

In 1997, when the Labour government took office, the party had not only significantly reformed their policies in a number of areas since 1992, but had also successfully conveyed that shift to the electorate. Reflecting on the 1992 general election defeat, key figures in Labour recognised the need for the party to modernise and for its policies to be both far more in tune with the electorate, but also to be demonstrably affordable. One of the policy areas the party had thought most deeply about was welfare. At the heart of this was the idea of the welfare state not just as a passive provider of benefits, but as an 'enabler'.<sup>2</sup> There was to be 'a greater emphasis on responsibilities as well as rights', but also on improving the opportunities available, increasing the incentives for work and decreasing the barriers, as well as enhancing employability and human capital through education and training.<sup>3</sup>

An important stage in this process was the 1992-1994 Commission on Social Justice, launched by the then Labour Party leader, John Smith. The Commission was intended to allow for deeper thinking about issues of social policy, including welfare, and a means for significant engagement with interested groups and individuals. But, most importantly, it was to help exorcise some of the ghosts of Labour's 1992 electoral loss and to convey to the electorate a broader message that the party was changing.

The Commission's work provides a number of lessons about the value of outsourcing policy making when in opposition, expanding the types of resource and thinking available to the party, undertaking more radical thinking at arm's length and engaging with different groups. However, the untimely death of Smith in 1994 and succession of Tony Blair as leader meant the Commission's eventual impact was less than it might have been. The symbolism of the Commission lay with Smith. But also, partly as a result of how far the party had come since the Commission was first launched, Blair was looking to achieve different objectives.

The journey to re-position the party in the eyes of the electorate continued, but by other means. And as far as generating policy was concerned, Blair and his Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown had moved on to thinking about more specific measures and how to achieve them in government. The Commission on Social Justice was a grand affair, but it was of its time. By the time it reported it was the practical, behind-the-scenes efforts of a smaller team that would produce the most tangible results.

## Genesis

The Commission was instigated through John Smith's desire to 'bury' Labour's 1992 shadow budget. The budget was viewed as a big reason for their general election defeat for which, as Shadow Chancellor, Smith was responsible. The budget had been an attempt to show greater fiscal responsibility by outlining the details of how Labour would fund proposals for benefit increases. Instead, in the final run up to the 1992 election, Smith and his team were still working out the finer details of where any increased taxes would fall. With Kinnock apparently vetoing anything that would make those on incomes under £22,000 worse off, that meant a tax increase on middle income earners. Coming during a recession, the proposals would disproportionately hit those in the south-east. Within days of its publication the Conservatives were successfully able to label it 'Labour's tax bombshell'.<sup>4</sup>

Those involved with the Commission are quite clear that it was part of a major and conscious aim after the election to 'bury the shadow budget'.<sup>5</sup> Even before he was elected to replace Neil Kinnock as Labour leader in July 1992, Smith was already talking to people about the need to rid the party of the budget's legacy.<sup>6</sup> It reflected a wider desire in Labour to show they could combine economic competency with social improvement, something that would prove a central theme in the report:

We are a commission on social justice, not on economic success, but it is a constant theme of this report that there is not an opposition between these two aims.<sup>7</sup>

While it began as a tactical effort, as the Commission was being put together, it soon began to evolve into something more. Its focus started with the tax and benefit system, but from there it became 'we need to rethink the welfare state'.<sup>8</sup>

The decision to have a Commission, rather than a policy review of some other form, was because of its symbolism. It was established, in December 1992, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Beveridge Report and billed as a 'new Beveridge'.<sup>9</sup> Its aim was to provide a 'comprehensive assessment and re-appraisal of the social condition of our nation', but one that would be 'radical'.<sup>10</sup> The timing and early references to Beveridge were also part of how the Commissioners would frame their thinking. In the introduction to the eventual report the Commission would note that the world was very different from that 'addressed fifty years ago' but Beveridge's five great evils – want, idleness, ignorance, disease and squalor – remained and the continuing inability to remove them was a major cause for concern.<sup>11</sup> They also added a sixth: discrimination.

### Setting it up

Alongside Smith as one of the main instigators behind the Commission was the newly appointed Shadow for Social Security, Donald Dewar. He and Smith worked closely together over the summer and autumn of 1992 on establishing a team behind the Commission. One of the earliest decisions was to base it in the Labour think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). The IPPR was part of a new wave of think tanks in the late 1980s, but also symbolised the renewal of thinking for the left.<sup>12</sup> It was a period of growth for think tanks. The newer think tanks were getting 'better at new ideas than the civil service or party research departments, more professional than the voluntary groups such as the Fabian Society or Bow Group, quicker than academics on their own, and with a finer sense than any of them of political timing – launching the right ideas at the right time'.<sup>13</sup> According to one of those involved, what Smith wanted was

a safe haven of a think tank so he could disown anything that we came up with. But he also wanted us close enough so that he could be sure that it wasn't going to go bonkers: "Nothing too wild-eyed or radical, thank you very much".<sup>14</sup>

The difficulties Labour was felt to have been having in refreshing and modernising its ideas had been a reason for Neil Kinnock's policy review in 1987:

Labour's policymaking before its policy review was of the Heinz-57 variety. There were more than 50 home policy groups, whose relations with front-bench spokesmen were often distant and at times positively hostile. The need for Labour and the left to have some body which could float ideas and say the as-yet unsayable, without that instantly being assumed to be party policy, was desperate.<sup>15</sup>

The IPPR performed that role: in 1989 it was able to 'firmly advocate membership' of the Exchange Rate Mechanism and thus move the party on to a more positive stance in advance of the official party policy line on that issue.<sup>16</sup> It was therefore seen as the natural home for the Commission.

A key figure who would be central to the Commission was the former Press Secretary to Neil Kinnock and then deputy director of the IPPR, Patricia Hewitt. She was also brought on board early. IPPR's role would also bring David Miliband, then a researcher at IPPR, on to the Commission as Secretary. Miliband, along with Hewitt, would prove central to the development of the Commission's final report, but also to what happened to its ideas afterwards.

The next decision was who should Chair the Commission. Smith and Dewar wanted a figure they knew well, someone Smith in particular could turn to if the Commission did not seem to be developing how they hoped, but also someone who would manage its complex ambitions well. They chose Gordon Borrie, an old friend of Smith's, a lawyer and former Director General of the Office of Fair Trading, but without any background in social policy. Key to getting Borrie on board, and ensuring that the project functioned, was that he and Hewitt got on. Dewar duly arranged a meeting between the two of them over a cup of tea and, despite concerns, they hit it off.<sup>17</sup>

The next step, and an important one, was choosing the commissioners. This was a tricky part of the process, because they were deliberately intended to be representative, both of society and also of the ideas that Smith wanted the Commission to cover. But it also needed to be a manageable group. Therefore it was decided to compile a group of commissioners that did not include any serving politicians and ones representing a 'range of views', but still largely drawn from those on the centre and left.<sup>18</sup> Smith, Dewar and Borrie, along with Hewitt, went about the task of going through the potential choices.

Some of those chosen were academics who were considered leaders in their field on various aspects of social justice: the sociologist, Dr Eithne McLaughlin, Professor Tony Atkinson on poverty, Professor John Gennard on industrial relations, Dr. Penelope Leach, a psychologist with expertise on child development, and Professor Ruth Lister on social policy. Steve Webb, now Liberal Democrat Minister for Pensions, was then an economist at the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS).

They also wanted to ensure they had representation from a range of backgrounds – minority groups, religion, business and those with ‘frontline’ experience in the charity sector or in community work. Bert Massie, a campaigner for disabled rights, and Anita Bhalla, a reporter and community worker, were selected. The Very Reverend John Gladwin brought religious representation, but had also spent some years working on social justice issues for the Church of England. For a business perspective, they considered a few possibilities before settling on Christopher Haskins, Chief Executive of Northern Foods, and a Labour supporter. Others, like Professor David Marquand and Emma Maclennan, were also closely associated with the Labour Party and well known to Smith: Marquand as a former MP and academic on Labour philosophy and Maclennan as a Labour Party policy officer on social security and taxation and adviser to Dewar. Margaret Wheeler would represent the trade unions and Bernard Williams was a Professor of Moral Philosophy. Williams was felt to have been particularly important at the beginning of the Commission; he provided a philosophical backdrop to their thinking about what was meant by social justice.<sup>19</sup>

Another early task was finding the money to pay for the Commission. Smith and Borrie had meetings over dinner with various businessmen and got some of them interested. Funders included David (now Lord) Sainsbury’s Gatsby Foundation and Glaxo Pharmaceuticals. Through Hewitt there was also a connection to Andersen Consulting and their charitable trust, Andersen Foundation, and there was funding from a couple of unions, including UNISON.<sup>20</sup> The total budget in the end was around £250,000, but ‘many extras were provided in services and help provided free’, including the time spent writing issue papers.<sup>21</sup> They also managed to co-opt individuals to advise on later stages of the work; as well as his Liberal Democrat credentials, Steve Webb brought an analytical capability from working in IFS and allowed the Commission to somewhat ‘tap into IFS resources’.<sup>22</sup> The money, for the most part, went towards the costs of visits and of the secretariat support through IPPR. The Commissioners themselves were part-time and unpaid. The Commission as a whole worked out of the IPPR’s premises on the Strand.

### Producing the report

In its 18 months of existence the Commission had 16 full meetings. Beyond that the substantial work was by three sub-committees covering ‘work and wages’, ‘money and wealth’ and ‘services and communities’.<sup>23</sup> They made ‘outreach visits’ to about 80 organisations in 11 different cities or regions.<sup>24</sup> These were considered especially important, particularly for those less used to contact with such groups. Some of the commissioners were, according to one interviewee, more used to the ‘very strong characters who pulled those places together’, and felt that these visits provided a real challenge to the Commission’s preconceptions.<sup>25</sup> Other members of the commission just found it ‘very interesting’.<sup>26</sup> One of the first visits was to Family Action in Rogerfield and Easterhouse (FARE). This was a grassroots charity and community action project set up in 1989 to improve the lives of local residents and tackle the crime, low aspirations and violence of the Easterhouse estate in Glasgow. It was the same area that would inspire the Conservative politician Iain Duncan Smith a decade later in his own efforts to tackle social justice issues.<sup>27</sup>

Central to the way the Commission worked were 13 issue papers published in order to ‘develop ideas and stimulate debate’. Some were by members of the Commission, others by IPPR staff and some by outsiders with expertise. The final one, *Act Local: Social Justice from the Bottom-Up*, was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The others were largely researched and written in the author’s own time.<sup>28</sup> They were about ‘generating a ... conversation’:

We thought that with each of them we could test out our initial thinking, we could fly some kites, we could ask questions and we could test ideas.<sup>29</sup>



Views were also gathered through written evidence from academics, charities, politicians, trade unions, businesses and members of the public. They received between 450 and 500 written submissions and had meetings with many people, including key members of the Shadow Cabinet and other senior figures in the party.<sup>30</sup>

Despite all these sources of evidence, many of those involved identify Patricia Hewitt and David Miliband as the two most important resources the Commission had. They were the ones who drove the project forward, organised the members and the production of the research and did much of the detailed work. Hewitt also 'covered the waterfront' in terms of the breadth of her knowledge on pension and welfare issues.<sup>31</sup> As they moved towards the drafting and re-drafting of the final report, it was Miliband and Hewitt who took this job on.<sup>32</sup>

The Commission members did not always get along. For journalist and Welfare State historian Nick Timmins, the Commission's large and 'diverse membership' meant it looked for compromises and was the reason why it 'proved no Beveridge'.<sup>33</sup> Others involved agree that there were 'one or two difficult members', but felt that there were actually very few areas of strong disagreement and that the few long committee sessions or meetings of the working subcommittees were surprisingly productive; in particular, as one member recalled, their 'weekend-long get-togethers were very positive'.<sup>34</sup>

The Commission was designed to be independent of Labour, it would be 'free to recommend what it likes'.<sup>35</sup> In reality it reported its thinking all the way along. Smith's enthusiasm for the Commission at that time was high; he was reported to be very pleased with the publications and made a point of encouraging the shadow cabinet to read them.<sup>36</sup> Gordon Brown and Tony Blair were among those shadow ministers encouraged to take an interest. Brown showed enthusiasm and sent over a 'battered copy of the biography of Beveridge' in the Commission's early days. Blair, then Shadow Home Secretary, also showed early interest and enthusiasm, but his contact was limited.<sup>37</sup> Borrie also went to one or two shadow cabinet meetings.<sup>38</sup> There were also some meetings initiated by individuals and groups in the wider Labour party. But, for some of the Commission, they were a bit disappointing as they showed that the 'Labour Party was still very stuck in the days of 1945 and the failure to move on from universality'.<sup>39</sup> However, the main point of contact between the Commission and Labour were Smith and Dewar.

The Commission continued to make visits and publish discussion papers throughout 1993 and into 1994. The final visit was to organisations in London in March 1994 and the final issue paper to be produced was David Donnison's on local social justice efforts in July 1994. But, on 12 May 1994, nearly five months before the Commission would report back, John Smith died of a heart attack aged 55. Smith's death was a huge shock for the party. Almost immediately Tony Blair was being touted as a likely successor. He eventually stood against John Prescott, with Gordon Brown standing aside, and was elected on 21 July 1994. What Smith would have done with the Commission's findings became the great unknown. When Blair eventually launched its final report on 24 October 1994, three months after becoming Party Leader, many in the Commission felt that their impact and influence were already on the wane. However, to understand what influence they did eventually have, it is first necessary to examine what they ended up saying.

### The report

The Commission had been given a remit 'running across the whole of the tax and benefits system, including the possibility of integrating them, as well as employment, education, training, housing and childcare'.<sup>40</sup> The independence and freedom of their terms of reference gave the Commission a licence to think more fundamentally and radically, but also, it was hoped, benefitting the party itself. It would be able to move the debate on to new areas and more radical thinking – challenging long-held Labour tenets. At the same time, Smith, from the outset 'underlined that Labour would remain free to pick and choose from its conclusions'.<sup>41</sup> This provided a safety valve if reactions to the Commission as it went along, or when it published, were not good. Lastly, reflecting the lessons from the 1992 election, the Commission was not obliged to 'create a detailed programme of spending and revenue raising for the next few years' where social justice policies were concerned.<sup>42</sup>

The concept, and 'ideal', of social justice was defined early on through their interim reports, *The Justice Gap* and *Social Justice in a Changing World*, both published in July 1993. This was an important foundation for the Commission, but would come to frame wider thinking about social justice and 'fairness' in New Labour. The Commission came to define social justice as four rights:



1. the equal worth of all citizens before the law
2. the right of citizens to be able to meet basic income needs, shelter and other necessities
3. the right to opportunities and life chances
4. that, although not all inequalities are unjust, 'unjust inequalities should be reduced and where possible eliminated'.<sup>43</sup>

The Commission argued that addressing these rights was compatible with economic success if it meant combating the social and fiscal costs of poverty and injustice, such as the welfare bill. More than that, the argument went, there would be increased economic contributions if the potential achievements of citizens were better realised. Likewise, economic success was a pre-condition for addressing social justice since, the more economically successful a country, the better it can tackle them.

The broader philosophical thinking in the report was important, but so were the practical ideas. The report was not intended by either the commissioners or its instigators to be a blueprint for government – not a plan and not a manifesto.<sup>44</sup> However, it still aimed to 'go into some detail about some reforms' contained within its pages.<sup>45</sup> They wanted to convey policy ideas that were feasible and achievable. But they were also inter-dependent: building up an 'entire sense of what the work programme was meant to be and what the questions were that you had to address in order to get your social justice and economic prosperity top line' was important in the later stages. Miliband brought in someone he knew from the private sector who worked with them on this, at some points 'basically on the floor with vast quantities of yellow stickies'.<sup>46</sup> They would go through each component in turn, considering the right order each stage would come up in order to achieve what they wanted.

An important thrust of the report was that of work being the best way out of poverty.<sup>47</sup> This was an essential issue. Smith himself had suggested when the Commission was launched that it could help move Labour onto a new era of thinking about the welfare state, it being no longer just about 'a safety net, but of creating a springboard to independence, self-reliance and personal fulfilment. People don't want handouts; they want a chance to achieve'.<sup>48</sup>

This emphasis was apparent in the four propositions into which policy suggestions were organised:

1. that the welfare state must be a 'springboard for economic opportunity'
2. that education and training needed investment to achieve this and were currently insufficient
3. that there was a need for a better balance between employment, education and family responsibilities to give better choices to people
4. that 'social institutions from the family to local government' needed improvement.<sup>49</sup>

On some issues the Commission had made some progress but not enough to warrant inclusion in the final report. This included work on how to better reflect part-time workers in a contributory benefit system and on tax-benefit integration. In this area the Commission rejected wholesale integration, but may have contributed to later thinking around tax credits.<sup>50</sup>

There were other areas that proved problematic. Shortly before his death, when meeting with members of the Commission, Smith had been furious about their plans to advocate the abolition of mortgage tax relief. Part of this may well have been thinking back to the problems in 1992 when Smith's shadow budget had been seen to particularly target middle class taxes. However, by that time a commission involving the Duke of Edinburgh had already recommended its abolition, so the Commission felt it would have 'looked pretty stupid' not to do likewise.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, Smith was unhappy with it, telling them that 'you've got to understand that politics is as much about interest as it is about ideas. This is going to upset middle class mortgage owners and I won't have it'.<sup>52</sup> It showed that there was actually a fine balance between having designed a Commission whose ideas you could still reject and the danger of being associated with them regardless. In the end, the Conservative government went on to restrict the measure and it was finally abolished under Gordon Brown's chancellorship.

### Impact

The Commission on Social Justice was conceived as a means to help create a practical background for a Labour government of the future, but with John Smith as leader. Without Smith it was a different story.<sup>53</sup> Views are mixed

among former members about how influenced Blair was by the Commission. What seems clear is that, as leader, he was more cautious than when he had been Home Secretary.<sup>54</sup>

Brown continued to show an interest, continuing to use the phrase 'social justice', though not necessarily referencing the Commission's work.<sup>55</sup> The attitude of Blair, some of those involved in the Commission felt, was very different. Blair's response to the Commission was not about how far he agreed or disagreed, used or did not use their ideas, but that it was Smith's Commission, not his. For one Commissioner, though he never heard explicitly what Blair thought, it did seem that as soon Blair became leader he was making noises that he wanted to start with a blank sheet. He did not want to be tied down by his predecessor; he didn't want any commitments laid down by others.<sup>56</sup> Even though Blair spoke at the launch, it wasn't he that commissioned them.<sup>57</sup>

However, in other ways Blair did show an interest. Soon after the death of Smith, during the leadership contest, key members of the Commission went to see Blair to brief him on the emerging conclusions. Blair's response was 'very interesting'; not least because it showed how far Blair had already developed his view of the strategic positioning he wished to move the party towards:

"Hmmm", he said, "Some of this isn't New Labour enough. Some of it is absolutely bang-on. Absolutely we can get rid of mortgage tax relief. But some of it is too much".<sup>58</sup>

On some issues Blair was quite opposed. Though he supported the abolition of mortgage tax relief, he very much disliked their proposal for repayable tuition fees.<sup>59</sup> For the Commission, the 'social justice case for change was absolutely compelling'.<sup>60</sup>

Here was a vast middle-class subsidy going through subsidised tuition grants to essentially middle class children paid for by essentially working-class taxation.<sup>61</sup>

It is an interesting question as to whether the Commission helped create Labour's thinking on welfare issues and social justice or merely represented views that were already latent within the party. Opinions are mixed. The fact that key members went on to be more closely involved with Blair's leadership shows it was a source of influence, especially David Miliband who moved over to head Blair's policy unit. However, some of this might show that they were reflecting a view that was already developing and would go further under Blair. The word from senior Labour ranks was that the Borrie report was good on analysis, less good on prescription.

Some suggestions did disappear without a trace, such as the Citizen's Service.<sup>62</sup> Other ideas were picked up, but may have come from other sources that had got to the same point. One particular example of this was the concept of an 'active welfare state' and reform of the employment service. This drew heavily on developments in Australia and Scandinavia, and particularly in the US under President Bill Clinton. This was where Blair also wanted to be; 'everyone wanted to go in that direction, so that was easier to do'.<sup>63</sup> Blair would tell an audience in July 1994 that:

I quite understand the resentment of every taxpayer who has to pay £20 a week in taxes to keep three million unemployed.<sup>64</sup>

This 'tough position on welfare dependency' can be traced both to the Clinton approach to communicating and campaigning, as much to his government's policy reforms in 'workfare'.<sup>65</sup> Blair's own efforts between 1994 and 1997, emulating Clinton, were about reassuring voters 'about the limits to the party's egalitarian aspirations' and the 'articulation of a new stance'.<sup>66</sup> Such issues were present in the Social Justice Commission, but not always conveyed in the same way.

In November 1995 Chris Smith replaced Dewar as Shadow Secretary of State for Social Security. Smith was tasked to look again at everything – from the string of proposals spawned by half a dozen inquiries including Borrie and Dahrendorf, Rowntree and Carnegie, to much more radical "Big Bang" solutions.<sup>67</sup> And Chris Smith was not the only one. In the run up to the 1997 election, Frank Field was also addressing the issue of welfare reform. Field was Chair of the Select Committee on Health and Social Security, but was also involved in building the case for a number of reforms during Blair's years as leader of the Opposition. These included his book *Making Welfare Work*, in 1995.

But, while 'Blair searched, Brown did'.<sup>68</sup> For Gordon Brown shedding the image of Labour as a 'tax-and-spend' party and instead creating one of 'rigorous control of borrowing exercised by the 'Iron Chancellor' was the most

important goal of that period of opposition.<sup>69</sup> It was what he had been working towards under Smith as leader, and it was also Smith's reasoning behind the Commission. But alongside that was the issue of equality of opportunity, another theme of the Commission. Brown, in his time in opposition, focused on particular strands of policy and the means to pay for them. Plans for youth training, a kind of back-to-work assistance for under-25 year olds that would become the New Deal for Youth, had to be paid for. These benefit to work proposals 'had much in common with the road that [Ken] Clarke was treading, but went much further'.<sup>70</sup> Brown's big idea was a windfall tax on the profits utility companies had made since privatisation, and one which reflected the degree to which they were under-valued when first privatised (itself a fascinating story in opposition policy making). In the end, it was the New Deal and later tax credits to help those coming off benefits and into work that would prove to be the most visible and worked out of Labour's policies.

### Conclusion

Views are mixed on how influential the Commission on Social Justice was. For Nick Timmins,

How far Labour's position on the welfare state would have changed if John Smith had lived is highly debatable. But his creation of the arm's-length Commission for Social Justice had at last opened the doors to new thinking in Labour's ranks after well over a decade's sterile defence of the status quo.<sup>71</sup>

For another former Labour minister, the Commission,

was completely crucial in shifting Labour from a policy of, philosophically, focusing on equality of outcomes to one which was much more focused on 'hand-up not a hand-out'. Philosophically it was very important.<sup>72</sup>

However, as Timmins also argued, the Commission may have contributed to a developing broader shift in the party because it was 'working with the grain'; it was representative of a 'broader intellectual tide'.<sup>73</sup> Others, involved in the Commission, also argue that it was representative of this wider move, rather than a cause of it. There are also points made about how much the Commission helped cement these changes within the party as, 'despite attacking a range of Labour shibboleths, the report failed to cause instant outrage in the party'.<sup>74</sup> One member is very clear about the limits of their influence; by 1997 'our report had faded into obscurity'.<sup>75</sup>

With the death of Smith and the arrival of Blair as leader, the Commission was clearly not as influential as it might have been in terms of the eventual policies Labour fought the 1994 election with and took into government. In terms of the re-positioning and *modernisation* of Labour during that time, there were also other moments and issues that were more important. But as a proving ground for the thinking of Miliband and Hewitt in particular, for its contribution to changing perceptions and the discussion around welfare policy that both Blair and Brown were later able to build on, it did play an important role. It also proved a valuable way of reaching out beyond the party (though perhaps neither as extensively nor with as many external groups as the Conservative Social Justice Policy Review did a decade and more later). It was deliberately intended to be a mix of people representing the views and make-up of the party.

The Commission was symbolic, but it was not mere symbolism. Importantly, it was an organised approach to policy making that used resources effectively and as well as generating ideas was also a proving ground for a number of individuals, including Hewitt and Miliband but also Steve Webb and Richard Reeves, at that time a researcher for IPPR, but more recently a close adviser to Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. The Commission also engaged with wider groups and it signalled change to the electorate. The way in which policy was developed subsequently to the Commission, the resources and the way of thinking about implementation, tell us much about opposition policy making and how small groups of people with the right resources can develop in-depth thinking. But the changes to Labour Party policy and messaging, which the Commission was part of, show how that can be just as important a part of opposition for policy making as the plans for government.

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Jill Rutter, Sam Sims, Edward Marshall, *The 'S' Factors: Lessons from IFG's Policy Success Reunions*, (London: Institute for Government, 2012)
- <sup>2</sup> Stephen Driver, 'Work to be done? Welfare reform from Blair to Brown', *Policy Studies* Vol.30/1 February 2009, pp.69-84, p.70
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How New Labour changed British Politics Forever*, (London: Abacus, 2011)
- <sup>5</sup> Interview
- <sup>6</sup> Interview
- <sup>7</sup> Commission on Social Justice, *Social Justice: Strategies for National Renewal (The Report of the Commission on Social Justice)*, (London: Vintage, 1994), p.17
- <sup>8</sup> Interview
- <sup>9</sup> Nicholas Timmins, 'Smith launches 'big idea' for welfare state', *The Independent*, 18 December 1992 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/smith-launches-big-idea-for-welfare-state-1564161.html> ; Ross McKibbin, 'On the Defensive', *London Review of Books*, Vol.17/2, 26 January 1995 pp.6-7
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- <sup>11</sup> Commission on Social Justice, *Social Justice*, pp.16, 23
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