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Poverty, Social Work and Social Justice

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Summary

The concept of social justice has become a common part of the political lexicon in recent years, with New Labour identifying it as a key goal of its social strategy. In this article, I set out my understanding of what the elements of a social justice programme should look like and apply it to the performance of the New Labour government in the policy area which has traditionally presented a major challenge to social workers, the issue of poverty. Finally, I raise some questions about what this analysis means for the future role of social work shaped by values of social justice.

The nature of social justice

My understanding of the concept of social justice draws on thinking from a range of disciplinary contexts, law, sociology and social policy in particular, over the past half century. Rawls, building on Hume, Aristotle, Hegel, Kant and other moral philosophers, argued that (Social) Justice meant 'fairness . . . ': 'the principle subject of justice is the basic structure of society . . . the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from *social* co-operation' (Rawls, 1999, pp. 3 ff); that is, he was not concerned with the benefits to be derived for individuals from private association. His view of a 'well-ordered society' was one in which 'everyone is presumed to act justly'. Rawls' rejection of social justice as being compatible with a society oriented towards individual gain is echoed by Donnison (1998) who argues that 'standards and values cannot be developed privately i.e. within one institution or in relation to one practice. . . . Similarly, what we apply to others we must apply to ourselves.'

From this general argument, Rawls derived two basic principles:

1 each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others;

2 social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all;

suggesting that 'all social values—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these values is to everyone's advantage'. This raises the distinction—to which I will return—between equality of opportunity, or access, on the one hand, and equality of outcome on the other. Rawls' test of social justice was through what he called the 'veil of ignorance', through which 'no one knows his place in society, class position or social status . . . they know that their society is subject to the circumstances of justice and whatever this implies.' People thus are moved to act without any sense of personal advantage and are driven by this concept of justice. Of course, governments do not act behind a veil of ignorance; indeed New Labour's increased use of targeted policies implies a deliberate attempt to pursue informed strategies, leaving aside the impact of the means by which those policies are pursued and the unintended consequences of policy.

New Labour sees social justice as inextricably linked with the status of citizenship (Powell, 1999). Marshall (1950) devised a taxonomy of rights by which one could identify the characteristics of citizenship. These incorporated:

- *civil rights*—property rights, legal guarantees and freedoms;
- *political rights*—right to vote, rights of association, constitutional participation; and
- *social rights*—entitlements to basic standards of education, health and social care, housing and income maintenance.

With other contemporary commentators (e.g. Lister, 1997), I do not regard these rights as of equal weight. Dean and Melrose (1999) argue that 'civil rights underwrite the operation of the market economy and are entirely consistent with class inequality' whereas 'political rights and social rights tend to challenge such inequality'. Thus citizenship and class to a large extent can embody opposing principles. Indeed, there remains in this arena of discourse a considerable intellectual and political task which is to establish the degree to which social justice, in the sense in which I and many others understand it, is compatible at all with the operation of a market economy. Doyal and Gough (1991) address some of the tensions in this area, arguing that social justice 'stands against fanatics of the free market economy . . . but also demands and promotes economic success' or, conversely, that 'social justice is an ideal in its own right but economic success also demands a greater measure of social justice'. I disagree with Raymond Plant (2000) who argues that social justice requires governments to work with the grain of the market; the market is, in my view, the fundamental cause of much injustice, both social and economic, as transitional and developing economies are finding to their cost (Craig, 2001*d*). The goal of social justice requires that government confronts the inequities of market systems.

My understanding of social justice places social and political rights far ahead of civil rights in the sense in which Marshall used them. Confusingly, civil rights have come in the past forty years, most of all through the political activism of blacks in the southern USA, more to mean social and political rights—such as freedom to travel on non-segregated buses, to attend mixed schools or to vote for or against George Bush in Florida—than the more narrow meaning ascribed them by Marshall. The views of early commentators on social justice are also limited in their understanding of the way in which the dimensions of gender and culture need to be built into a framework of values; to Marshall's taxonomy I would add, following Stephen Castles (2000) and others, the categories of cultural rights and gender rights. For minority ethnic groups, this means the right to be culturally different within a society which provides the same social, civil and political rights to all; that is, to be equal but different.

The concept of social justice received a welcome recent prominence with the work of the Commission for Social Justice (CSJ) (Borrie, 1994), established by the late John Smith when Labour Leader. In the context of deepening inequality and poverty, it suggested that social justice comprised:

- the equal worth of all citizens;
- the equal right to be able to meet their basic needs;
- the need to spread opportunities and life chances as widely as possible;
- the requirement that we reduce and where possible eliminate unjustified inequalities.

This begs a number of questions and the policy programme of New Labour has, in my view, continued to beg some of them. For example, it steadfastly avoids the questions of what basic needs are or what a decent income for all might be, and is prepared to maintain the social fund in existence, a fund which clearly impoverishes many families and pushes their income below the level of the Beveridge 'safety net' (Craig, 2001*b*); and it espouses the notion of equality of opportunity, rather than equality of outcome, which seems to me to be a far more robust indicator of a socially just society. The formulation of the last bullet point above seems to me to be redolent of the language of cutting and trimming by ministers in spending departments looking over their shoulders at the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

What all these definitions additionally fail to do is to highlight the role of those most disadvantaged by social injustice, as actors—rather than simply victims—in the search for social justice. The United Nations has, for example, pointed to the many ways, including organizational, informational and developmental ways, as well as the more familiar means, such as constitutional and legal, political and economic ways, in which participation by the disadvantaged themselves may promote social justice. My own additional emphasis would be on the role of community development (Craig and Mayo, 1995) as the means by which the excluded and the marginalized can act on their own behalves in this search.

In summary, then, my view of social justice is this: a framework of political objectives, pursued through social, economic, environmental and political policies,

based on an acceptance of difference and diversity, and informed by values concerned with:

- achieving fairness, and equality of outcomes and treatment;
- recognising the dignity and equal worth and encouraging the self-esteem of all;
- the meeting of basic needs;
- maximizing the reduction of inequalities in wealth, income and life chances; and
- the participation of all, including the most disadvantaged.

What this means in practice will continue to be the stuff of political debate. For example, although I agree with Le Grand (2000) that the objective of social justice requires an attack on those areas of inequality, such as education and health, where social injustice is done daily to millions of impoverished adults and children, there remain arguments about the means by which this can most effectively be done. My own view is that this can only be done within an explicitly value-led framework determined by the state through publicly-funded services (which might include both direct state provision or provision through not-for-profit organizations) and that this also requires redistributive policies for taxes and benefits. Although the Chancellor is clearly engaged in some covert redistribution and is beginning to inch towards a recognition of the need for more progressive tax increases, New Labour clearly holds to one major contradiction in seeing the for-profit sector as a major player in the pursuit of social justice.

Poverty, New Labour and social justice

New Labour came to power in 1997 with a commitment to address the appalling legacy of poverty and inequality left by the previous three governments. From the early 1980s, poverty had not only grown to the point where about one-third of the UK population was in poverty, making it bottom or near-bottom of most international league tables amongst developed countries, the gap between rich and poor had widened substantially. In this context, one significant social policy innovation of the 1997 government was to create a special unit attached to the Cabinet Office, the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU). Social exclusion was, in the new government's terms, 'what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown'—precisely the scenario faced by very many social work service users. Announcing the SEU's establishment, Tony Blair indicated what his government's broad strategy would be: at national government level, the SEU would work to an inter-departmental ministerial group, producing 'joined-up solutions to joined-up problems' and at local level, partnership working, drawing local agencies together, in a wide range of policy arenas. Social exclusion, however, was used in a way which lessened the political profile of the issue of material poverty (Alcock *et al*., 1995, 1999).

The Social Exclusion Unit has been at the heart of recent discussion about disad-

vantage in Britain, producing a series of major reports, some on specific population groups such as 16–17 year-olds not in education, employment or training, rough sleepers or teenage parenting (SEU, 1998*a*, 1998*c*, 1999*a*, 1999*b*), others on aspects of the government's wider strategy for neighbourhood renewal (SEU, 1998*b*). The work of eighteen Policy Action Teams, each on specific aspects of disadvantage, with the first consolidated report, *Bringing Britain Together*, fed into the SEU's latest major report, *Preventing Social Exclusion* (SEU, 2001). The Unit, whose life is currently only secured until the end of 2002, is currently consulting on transport policy and on the educational achievement of children in care. A similar, though slightly more participative strategy, is being pursued in Scotland through the Scottish Parliament (Scottish Executive, 2000*a*, 2000*b*) and in Wales.

This focus on social exclusion sits alongside a wider agenda informed by New Labour's idea of social justice, itself heavily shaped by the CSJ (though not adopting its programme wholesale by any means) but, most of all, by its welfare reform programme. As noted, the Blairite notion of social justice was one which privileged equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome. The *New Contract for Welfare* (Department of Social Security, 1998*a*) reflected this in its agenda for reform of social security. This advanced the 'third way' of reform (gliding between the caricatured *status quo* of ever-increasingly generous benefits and a privatized residual future), 'promot[ing] opportunity instead of dependence, with the welfare state for the broad mass of people, but in new ways to fit the modern world'. This would 'widen the exits from welfare dependency by offering tailor-made help for individuals'. The reforms would be driven 'by the need to spend money in the fairest and most effective way' (which came to be seen as a euphemism for more targeting) and was, Blair claimed, not necessarily about a budget-cutting agenda, a claim which rapidly looked somewhat shaky as government first cut lone parent benefits and then limited pensions increases to 75p. More positively, however, the Prime Minister committed his government, in 1999, to 'the historic aim . . . to be the first generation to end child poverty', in twenty years and, more recently noted that 'if we don't raise the standard of living of the poorest people in Britain we will have failed as a government'.

Those such as the New Policy Institute (NPI) monitoring government's progress in challenging poverty and social exclusion point to an uneven picture of achievement (Rahman *et al*., 2000). There have been improvements in key education (educational attainment for 11year-olds, those achieving GCSEs and in the qualifications obtained by 19 year-olds, and reductions in school exclusions, with greater falls amongst those from minority ethnic groups), and housing indicators (reductions in mortgage arrears and numbers of houses without central heating). On the other, not only had inequalities in health remained but in some instances—for example, mortality rates amongst the under-65s—the gap between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' areas had grown. This was not simply because rates were falling more slowly in some very deprived areas but because in such areas, mortality rates, including from coronary heart disease and stroke, had actually risen.

In 1998/9, numbers on low income remained at an historically high level, with over 14 million people living in households below half the average income, a figure

slightly above the 1996/7 figure. This figure was not substantially altered in the latest issue of *Households Below Average Income* (HBAI, Department of Social Security, 2001) but more worrying still, the HBAI figures show that inequality is growing. The report suggests that 'overall income inequality rose slightly between 1994/5 and 1999/2000', a picture giving a rosy hue to the reality. Between 1994/5 and 1998/9, income growth after housing costs was 10 per cent for the poorest 10 per cent but 13 per cent for the richest 10 per cent, that is a 30 per cent relatively larger rate of growth for the richest compared with the poorest. The arguments about huge payments made to 'fat cats', including the retiring chairman of Railtrack, continuing to the present with the announcement that top pay in Britain (even amongst failing companies) is substantially higher than in all European countries, was given further statistical substance; the richest 10 per cent within the UK now 'earn' 27 per cent of all income, the proportion taken by the poorest 10 per cent has fallen to under 3 per cent. Just over 60 per cent of all people now have incomes below the national average, another indicator of persisting inequality, reflected not only in the traditional 'north–south divide', but within and between cities, towns and regions.

Raising benefit levels in real terms for the poorest would of course be one relatively straightforward way of addressing the issue of poverty and inequality and some groups have seen their benefits rise by more than the rate of inflation. Work, however, not benefits levels, was explicitly 'at the heart of [our] welfare reform' and by the arrival of the 2001 New Labour government, this was institutionalized with the rebranding of the Department of Social Security as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Work, however, as the main route out of 'welfare dependence' (itself a stigmatizing and divisive formulation) fails, as Lister (2001) has noted, to attach equal prominence and regard to caring or community and voluntary work as options for those wishing to make a contribution as citizens to society, options which have strongly gendered associations. The route into work has in any case led for many to low paid, insecure jobs in the service or caring sectors, sectors characterized increasingly by their association with female workers and those from minority ethnic groups; and the route into work is one which still remains closed off for many of those groups with which social workers spend much of their time—people with physical, emotional or mental disabilities—and is irrelevant to another major group of service users—older people, most of whom are 'welfare dependent'.

'Race' and ethnicity has been another policy area where government's inconsistencies in its claims to be pursuing a strategy of social justice have been sharply exposed. On the one hand, its response to Steven Lawrence's murder was relatively swift and uncompromising, although there remains doubt as to how effectively the Race Relations Amendment Act will be policed. Government itself has given a poor lead in terms of its attitude to ethnic monitoring, and the welfare state as a whole—including the police and criminal justice system—remains riddled with racism (Craig, 2001*a*). Some minority ethnic groups—particularly those of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and African Caribbean origins—are up to four times as likely to be in poverty as the population as a whole—yet the government appears unwilling to draw

any obvious connections between this fact and the origins of the anger felt by young men within many older city areas, anger provoked by recent fascist interventions.

The SEU has only very latterly begun to address the issue of race in its analyses (SEU, 2000; Craig, 2001*c*). The Home Office has responded to the marginalization of the black and minority ethnic (BME) voluntary and community sector with specific funding streams for capacity-building; however, research into local governance shows how marginalized BME groups remain (Craig *et al*., 2002). Support for BME groups may be seen as an indicator of growing awareness within government of the extent of racism within societal structures, but this awareness is compromised significantly by its victimizing attitude to refugees and asylum seekers, subject to an increasingly racist immigration regime before entry and, following entry, to, now, a voucher scheme which stigmatizes and impoverishes (Boswell, 2001) and, in the near future, to a processing regime which commentators doubt will be less humiliating or punitive. Ironically, the government's own research shows that there is a net economic benefit of about £2.6 billion per year to the Treasury from in-migrants, including refugees and asylum-seekers (Glover *et al*., 2001).

Government anti-poverty strategy contains within it one overarching flaw, the absence of any serious debate about the adequacy of benefit levels, an issue which will achieve a higher profile if unemployment levels climb again. Essentially, the focus on the more diffuse and less-easily quantifiable notion of social exclusion is not unhelpful to a government unprepared to address issues of income levels. The SEU's remit explicitly excludes it from looking at the adequacy of benefits and, as noted earlier, government—in 'non-joined-up' mode—has already driven through policies which have reduced benefit income for some groups, including some people with disability, often under the cover of a rather moralizing and victimizing tone. The government's suggestion that its interest lies in 'giving a hand-up and not a hand-out' has too easily slid into attacks on what are already poverty-level benefit levels, comparing poorly with our European neighbours (Gordon and Townsend, 2000).

For example, Britain has between 8 and 9 million people who have some form of disability; half have incomes below the official poverty line (half average income) and considerably less than half of disabled people are in paid employment. New Labour's response to this is redolent more of the stick than the carrot: cuts in some disability benefits have already been pushed through and the DWP is introducing regular reviews of the more than 600,000 annual new incapacity benefit claimants. The rhetoric of this is again about getting more people into work; the reality is more likely, as disability groups have argued, to be greater hardship and stigma for those in receipt of benefit, reduced levels of take-up and, given that many disabled people have children, a likelihood of increasing levels of child poverty.

The more general resistance of New Labour to addressing structural faults—particularly stigma and low take-up levels—of means-tested benefits impacts on other major groups with which social workers have daily contact. Amongst older people for example, there remain approximately half a million people entitled to income support—that it a supplement to already inadequate income—not claiming it, costing them on average £16 weekly. Approximately 1.3 million pensioners are

still dependent solely on means-tested benefits, including about one-third of all Scottish pensioners. Older people, as with the UK population as a whole, have experienced enormous and continuing polarization in income and wealth; whilst the wealthiest 20 per cent of pensioners saw an increase in incomes of 80 per cent over the past twenty years, the bottom fifth had a rise of 30 per cent, barely keeping pace with inflation and the number of pensioners living in poverty (below half average income) increased by approximately 100,000 between 1997 and 1999.

Government proposals, outlined in the Pensions Green Paper (Department of Social Security, 1998*b*), to give a stronger role to the private sector in pensions provision have been widely criticized by older people's organizations as failing to acknowledge that for many of those nearing or in retirement, reliance on private pensions income is completely unrealistic and it is beginning to be clear that many large companies are finding the pension burden unsustainable when faced with demands from shareholders for the maintenance of dividends. Similarly, the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) introduced in 2001 is regarded as derisory by pensioner groups opposed to means-testing and targeting on the poorest. The impact of MIG on pensioners—as with some of New Labour's other most recent initiatives—may be understated at present. However, measures to move pensioners out of poverty may well also have an initial impact—as those closest to the poverty line are lifted over it—but then falter as those well below the line find themselves still substantially below it. As income support and MIG are raised faster than basic pensions, more pensioners will be 'floated' onto means-tested benefits—which they will then not take up. The reluctance of the government to consider meeting the costs of nursing and personal care, recommended by the Royal Commission on Long Term Care, also threatens to impoverish many older people.

At the other end of the age scale, the success of the government's 'crusade' against children's poverty has similarly been uneven. In 1997/8, of the 14 million people living in poverty, about one-third were children. Government has introduced a range of significant tax and benefit changes, including improvements to child benefit and children's rates for income support, and the new Working Families Tax Credit, and Children's Tax Credit, the impacts of some again yet to work their way through the system. Many children should also benefit from the fact that hitherto unemployed parents and carers are now in work compared with a few years ago. The overall impact of tax-benefit changes and the range of partnership initiatives such as SureStart, appears (Piachaud and Sutherland, 2001) to be that about one and a quarter million children have been lifted out of poverty. The largest number are in workless families, a result of stealthy increases in benefit levels for families with young children. However, those lifted out of poverty are, like pensioners, those where it was easiest to achieve this goal—that is, those nearest the poverty line. If unemployment remains low and paid work increases substantially—not factors over which the government can exercise a great deal of control in a period of accelerating globalization of economic activity—child poverty might fall by another 1.2–1.6 million. Even this achievement would still leave Britain with one of the highest levels of poverty amongst children both in historic terms for Britain and in contemporary terms for Europe as a whole; meanwhile, the UK is the most expensive and least

well-provided for in terms of childcare—critical for mothers wishing to work—within Northern Europe.

There are other groups within society which have been known to suffer poverty and social exclusion on a substantial level but whose situation has yet to be addressed effectively by government; these include, for example, young disabled people (Morris, 2001), people with learning disabilities, people with mental illness, and those misusing drugs or alcohol. Suicide rates for young men have been increasing recently, as have rates for attempted suicide for children, and suicide rates for women in prison, a consequence of the failure adequately to resource mental health provision. A recent report by the Terence Higgins Trust (2001) shows how those with HIV are still dealt with on a departmental basis within government and local government—it notes that 'the lack of joined-up thinking by those in authority is a key component in contributing to social exclusion'. More generally, those living in rural areas, where poverty and social exclusion are exacerbated by difficulties of accessing services, isolation and increased costs of living, await a comprehensive and integrated strategy for addressing their needs, a strategy further delayed by the impact of foot and mouth disease, which itself has impoverished rural dwellers living at the margins.

What role for social work?

There is a long tradition of texts (for example, Bailey and Brake, 1975; Corrigan and Leonard, 1978; Bolger *et al*., 1981; Becker and MacPherson, 1988; Adams *et al*., 1998) which argues the need for social work to position itself 'in and against the state', that is, working within the state mechanisms in the production and delivery of welfare, but maintaining a radical and critical position in relation to its policies and goals. Some of this critique has been reflected recently within the columns of this journal (for examples see the Special Issue of *BJSW*, August 2001 on *Social Work and New Labour: the end of the first term*). There isn't space to repeat the detailed arguments of these texts here but one clear theme which emerges from this literature is the need for social workers not to lose sight of their role as agents of progressive social change. Although the context within which many of these books were written—what Becker and MacPherson described as 'a central government onslaught on poor people'—has changed, the poverty facing most of social services users has not, and the need for this role is not diminished. Indeed the ambiguity and ambivalence which characterizes New Labour's stance towards poverty and the poor (Lister, 2001) makes it all the more necessary for clarity in this role. The fear of the loss of this clarity has been accentuated as UK governments have moved towards what Clarke and Newman (1997) characterized as the managerial state, as central government has become more controlling in relation to local government and (more arguably) in relation to the voluntary and community sector, where many social workers operate, and as social work itself has begun to appear ever more marginal to the government's broad political and social strategy (Jordan, 2001; Jones, 2001). This picture is a marked change from, for example, the period of the introduction

of the social fund in 1986–89, when social workers as a profession and individually led the campaign against the fund alongside welfare rights workers from the voluntary sector. It is unusual now for social workers to make broadbrush statements about the growth of poverty and inequality; and even more unusual for them to be listened to by government.

There can be little doubt that major contributory factors to this apparently lowered profile are the huge changes consequent on community/social care legislation in the early 1990s and since, reducing many social workers to the status of unqualified accountants, managing care budgets within increasingly limited resources, and on the huge organizational changes consequent on local government reorganization in the late 1990s (Craig and Manthorpe, 1999). However, as Jones (2001), notes from his interviews with front line social workers, state social workers in particular observe that their work has systematically been not only transformed but also downgraded, a process which has not been halted by the arrival of New Labour in 1997. Despite an impressive record overall in managing children's services (Thoburn, 2001), the increasing numbers of child protection failures—themselves at least a partial indicator of pressures on social work staff—have been used by government as a rod with which to beat the profession. Government's view of social work—as, for example, Secretary of State Milburn's speech to the Social Services Conference in Harrogate 2001 demonstrated—is one which regards it as having little to offer in terms of policy development but which requires an inordinate level of central management and policing, policing which is as much ideological as financial.

In this context, but with social workers daily facing the consequences of government's social and economic policies, what strategies are open to social work to promote an agenda of social justice? First must be the accumulation and dissemination of evidence. In a recent conversation with the Chair of the Social Security Select Committee, I was told that Parliament still is heavily dependent on the evidence, in individual case study or witness statement form, or as well-informed and accessible data, in its task of challenging the growing power of the Executive. This evidence will show the actual—as opposed to theoretical—impact of policies on ordinary people, and particularly those which Parliament has most difficulty in accessing—who form the majority of social workers' caseload. This evidence is critical in providing a balance to what he described as 'the clever ideas which come out of the Treasury and have never been tested in real life'.

Second, New Labour's social exclusion strategy appears, as one commentator put it recently, to rely more on the creation of a new layer of bureaucracies—typically partnerships—which enforce rather than negotiate community regeneration. Despite the New Labour fixation with community empowerment, it is still the case that local service users and community groups have little power over the programmes emerging from the work of the SEU or more generally from government. Major partnership initiatives remain dominated by partners with power (Craig and Taylor, 2002; Craig *et al*., 2002) and these more powerful partners, often under considerable resources pressure themselves, tend to focus on targets set by government, excluding voluntary and community sector organizations from serious influence on policy

development. Here again, social workers can play an important role as facilitators and advocates for those most on the margins of society, and to 'make the invisible visible', a particularly pertinent task as poverty has become more and more a private affair (Craig, 1998). At present, as Jones and others demonstrate, social workers are loaded down with new responsibilities and it is indeed hardly surprising that they are not engaged with debates on social exclusion and community renewal.

In the context of time and resources pressure, partnership policies are likely to work at the level of least common denominator and not be sensitive enough to the needs of specific groups within local populations. For example, as a recent report from the major children's charities noted (NSPCC, 2001), Health Improvement Plans focus on national targets and priorities and ignore key issues and groups, such as child abuse, alcohol misuse and the needs of disabled and minority ethnic young people. In line with many recent accounts of partnership working, their analysis indicates a failure adequately to consult with local communities and service users on policy and service development. Social workers—both in voluntary and statutory organizations, can play a key role in ensuring that this consultation takes place in a way which meets the needs of local people, including those often overlooked in consultative exercises (Craig, 1999; Craig *et al*., 2002)

Thirdly, there remains much work to be done to promote the ideal of 'joined-up government'—to take one example, the narrowing of eligibility for legal aid through the new community legal service will ensure that effective legal advice and aid is denied to many of those in poverty who are the users of social services; as Stein (2001) notes 'the government's key initiatives for tackling poverty and social exclusion makes no reference to legal advice and advocacy'.

Fourthly, social workers need to apply the principles of social justice to their own organizations. There is more than adequate evidence that in relation to some marginalized groups, and especially members of black and minority ethnic groups (Craig, 2001*a*), the record of social services is considerably less than impressive. This requires a clarity about objectives, goals and means, which requires that social workers engage with the political process at local and national level more effectively than they appear to have done in recent years, and address the deficiencies in their own organizations.

If this analysis is right, it also implies that social workers should reposition themselves not as the agents of endless top-down government initiatives but as those working more explicitly with and for the excluded and deprived, that is, to find an appropriate and critical political distance from a position of being merely agents of change driven by government objectives. This would require, *inter alia*, relearning the skills of community development, focusing on the increasingly submerged social work values of empowerment and advocacy, and becoming even more actively engaged in promoting user involvement within the range of local initiatives. There is already a firm basis for this to happen for, despite the hostile media coverage of social work, a recent *Community Care* survey showed for example that 'all of those who received personal care said it had improved their lives' (Downey, 2001). This agenda will, of course, have implications for the content of social work training. Paradoxically, however, whilst substantial government funding is made available to

a range of special initiatives, which local government is often expected to lead, social services departments—the largest remaining mainstream local government function —are themselves increasingly marginalized, with social workers able to do little more than offer a rescue service (Rickford, 2000). Indeed, the pace and direction of the overlapping 'modernization' and privatization agendas leave many wondering if social services departments will exist at all within a few years.

To be able to respond effectively to poverty at the grassroots, however, would also mean removing much of the heavy burden of administration, performance indicators, budget management and endless partnership meetings which social workers are obliged to attend and which, as Jones' research demonstrates generates more stress for social workers than direct work with service users. It would require that government responds to the increasingly urgent calls from social services directors for more realistic funding levels to meet the range of existing and new responsibilities they have to manage. In this area of strategy at least, front line social workers can have a clear common interest with their own management, in arguing a bottom-up case for social justice on the basis of local evidence.

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