'people who are living
in need are fully and
properly provided for.'

Margaret Thatcher

POOR BRITAIN

Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley

Foreword by A.H.Halsey

'To make ends meet is terrible.
You just can't make things balance.
You're below the breadline.'

Supplementary benefit claimant

On 22nd December 1983, Margaret Thatcher confidently asserted in the House of Commons, 'The fact remains that people who are living in need are fully and properly provided for'.

Against a backdrop of the coldest political climate for the poor since the war, this book, based on the award-winning documentary series *Breadline Britain,* presents a comprehensive and up-to-date account of poverty in Britain. It is based on a major survey commissioned for the series and conducted by MORI, and also on the experiences of the poor themselves.

The survey found a substantial degree of social consensus about what constitutes an unacceptable living standard. Using these findings, the authors are able to provide a new measure of poverty based on the number falling below a socially determined minimum. This entirely original approach is of considerable importance to the development of an objective way of measuring poverty.

The authors draw out the implications for the degree of redistribution needed to tackle poverty and examine people's attitudes to a range of welfare policies. Their findings will be of central interest to anyone who wishes to discover the truth that lies behind the claims and counter-claims that are made about poverty in Britain today.

Joanna Mack is a producer/director for London Weekend Television's feature and current affairs departments. She produced and directed *Breadline Britain.* Stewart Lansley works for London Weekend Television and was a researcher on *Breadline Britain.* He is the author of *Housing and Public Policy* (Croom Helm, 1979) and joint author of *Poverty and Progress in Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

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Preliminaries

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Dr Owen: While wishing the Prime Minister a happy Christmas ...

Mr Boyer: Humbug.

Dr Owen: ... may I ask whether she is aware that 15 million people in Britain - that is the official figure - will be living at or below the poverty line this Christmas? ...

The Prime Minister: I recognise the right hon. Gentleman's very studied question. Before I answer him, may I ask him which definition of poverty he is using to reach that figure?

Dr Owen: It is the official Government statistic relating to the 3 million unemployed families, the 6 million families that are living on low wages and pensioners who face high costs for rented accommodation. If she checks that total, she will find that 15 million Britons are at or below the poverty line.

The Prime Minister: There is no Government definition of poverty. There are some 7 million people who live in families that are supported by supplementary benefit. There are many other different definitions of poverty, which is why I asked the right hon. Gentleman to say which definition he was using. Many of the low-paid on supplementary benefit have incomes about 40 per cent above that level. They are wholly artificial definitions. *The fact remains that people who are living in need are fully and properly provided for.*

[The House of Commons,
22 December 1983, emphasis added]

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is based on the London Weekend Television series *Breadline Britain,* first broadcast in the summer of 1983. The series examined the lives of the poor in Britain in the 1980s. It was based on a major survey of people's living standards, conducted by Market and Opinion Research International (MORI). The four programmes were illustrated through the eyes of seven families representative of the poor.

These two sources also provide the bulk of the material for this book, though the context in which they are used is somewhat different. While the television series aimed to provide a broad-ranging introduction to the nature of poverty and its causes, illustrated vividly through the day-to-day experiences of the poor, the book's aim is more specifically to develop a new approach to the measurement of relative deprivation and poverty and to examine public attitudes to the role of the welfare state.

Although the book provides a detailed analysis of the original data provided by the LWT/MORI survey, it assumes no prior knowledge of either the academic literature or statistical techniques. Indeed, we hope that the book is readily accessible to any person interested in the future for the poor. Throughout, the theoretical arguments are illustrated by reference to the lives of the poor today, drawn in the main from the seven families featured in the television series but also from the many other families who helped us during the making of the series.

A lot of people contributed towards the making of the television series and the writing of the book. We are indebted to them all.

The survey itself was an enterprise depending critically on the contributions of others. The conceptual framework for the survey originated in conversation with Vic George. The design of the survey was a joint effort between the *Breadline Britain* team and MORI; in particular we would like to thank Steve Schiffers of LWT who extensively researched the Social Science

Research Council's survey archives for ideas and Brian Gosschalk of MORI who directed the survey with great understanding of what was required. In devising the questionnaire, we called extensively on the advice of Peter Townsend, Richard Berthoud, David Piachaud and Peter Taylor-Gooby. We would also like to thank Keith Hughes of the TAB Shop for his efficient and speedy programming of the computer analysis of the survey data.

Many people at LWT, either currently or recently, contributed towards the making of the *Breadline Britain* series or the production of the book. We would like to thank Su Wilkins, who co-researched the series; David Tereshchuk, the initial editor of the series, and his successor Julian Norridge; Paul Coueslant of LWT's community unit; Mary Murphy and her team in the library; and Jackie Gooden who typed Part II of the book. In particular, we are grateful to Jane Hewland, head of features at LWT - without her advice and support neither the television series nor this book would have been possible.

Vic George, David Piachaud, Peter Golding, Fran Bennett and Peter Taylor-Gooby have been kind enough to plough through earlier drafts of various chapters of the book. Their comments were all extremely useful and pertinent. Liz Paton has greatly improved the style and clarity.

Many others have contributed in many other ways to the project. In particular, we would like to thank A. H. Halsey, whose comments and encouragement have been greatly valued; Meghnad Desai for the statistical analysis he carried out to test for an 'income threshold' ; the staff of both the Child Poverty Action Group and the Low Pay Unit, who were always ready to help in providing information and comments; and Harold Frayman, who has had the patience to discuss the project right from its conception - regularly, in depth, in detail and as a result no doubt *ad nauseam.*

However, perhaps above all we would like to thank all the families and individuals currently suffering great hardship who nevertheless had the courage to help us in the making of *Breadline Britain.* We wish to remember Ernie Pegman who died soon after his eightieth birthday. At the age of 79, he told us:

> All I think about is when I reach the age of 80 that's me lot, I don't want to live no longer. Because I've had enough, haven't I, of worry. It's a disgrace when you get to such an age and you got to worry. It doesn't say much for the society we live in.

This book has been written with the hope that in some small way it might help promote the kinds of changes in society that would improve the lives of the millions of people now living in such desperate circumstances.

The views and opinions expressed in the book are, of course, our responsibility and ours alone.

JOANNA MACK
October, 1984 STEWART LANSLEY

Foreword

by Professor A. H. Halsey

Poverty and Plenty

Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley have written a sober book on a sombre subject. Poverty and how it should be dealt with can never be far from the concerns of any society: for society is essentially an evolved apparatus for the protection and enrichment of life and the prevention or delay of death. Society means a shared life. If some and not others are poor, then the principles on which life is shared are at issue: society itself is in question. All societies have either solved the question or perished. In modern society, where the means of solution include an historically-unprecedented command over nature, the question, somewhat paradoxically, becomes more rather than less urgent. To the degree that mankind dominates nature, so the expectation of plenitude is raised in every group and individual within society. Governments in rich societies face sterner tests of the legitimacy of their role in distributing the fruits of a more powerful human control of the sources of plenty.

Moreover and more particularly, Britain in the mid eighties faces the poverty question in a still more difficult form. Contemporary Britain has a peculiar history. Because it was the first democracy and the first industrial nation it was the place *par excellence* in which the promise of *shared riches* was born earliest and most vigorously developed. Because it was the country in which the idea of political democracy was most securely founded it became also an island in which the idea of citizenship, which is democracy beyond the polling booth embracing ultimately all social and economic as well as political relations, could be most extensively elaborated. British

governments, especially since the Second World War, have been accordingly exposed to especially strong demands for fair distribution and have been especially vulnerable to any sustainable charge of social injustice or failure of compassion.

Still more threatening to the frailty of government is that political parties in such a developed democracy are subjected to the chronic temptation, if not the virtual necessity, of bidding against each other in promises of delivery of the demanded combination of affluence with fair shares. And competitive hustings are played out on a stage with stronger illumination of the varied life and fortune of all the classes, status groups, regions, and ethnic communities which make up the society. Single-interest pressure groups add to the footlights and the chorus. On this view the part of Government in dealing with poverty is played against a background of increasing glare and noise.

At the same time some of the props which traditionally served to mute the social drama have been at least partially removed. In Victorian Britain the class structure and the status order reinforced each other to stabilize and perpetuate a society which was *both integrated and unequal.* The legitimacy of the unequal shares of wealth and income generated by a free market in capital and labour was widely accepted. Poverty was therefore accepted as an unavoidable, if regrettable, law of political economy. And the solutions lay not so much with governments as with private individuals and voluntary associations in self-help and charity. The Friendly Societies and Co-operative Societies of the urban industrial working class and the Charity Organisation Society of the middle class were energetic social responses to a class structure which some applauded, others resented, and most accepted in the hope that 'progress' would gradually mitigate and eventually abate its most tragic consequence - undeserved poverty.

The status order supported these responses. Working-class respectability disciplined the use of meagre resources among millions of families depending for their survival on manual labour. Horizons restricted by monochrome residential districts inhibited resentful comparisons. Educational and occupational

opportunities widening, however slowly, held out the hope of a better future, sanctioned success, and justified failure. But the experience of the middle years of the twentieth century has weakened status support for class-based poverty. Labour governments demonstrate that the superior classes are not necessarily born to rule. They also demonstrate that a working man's party in government is no guarantee that poverty will be abolished. Such experiences, by eroding trust in political hierarchy and political authority, further reduce more general belief and confidence in society itself.

Under these conditions the most likely victims are the poor. But even then the catalogue of British difficulties is incomplete. So far I have summarily listed only the rising popular demands and expectations of a mature democracy with a long history of economic growth. To this list of difficulties for Government must also be added the more recent history of reversal of national fortune. Britain in the twentieth century has lost its empire and its place as the leading industrial economy. Put in the terms now current in international press and television, what was once a leading if not *the* leading world power is now a declining off-shore island of Europe with a fate perhaps closer to Portugal or Greece than to the USA or the USSR. Britain of course shares with other industrial countries the series of economic recessions which began with the oil crisis of 1973. Despite becoming herself an oil producer, Britain has fared conspicuously badly as an economy in the past decade. These recent failures have reduced, or at least been perceived as reducing, our *capacity* simultaneously with the rise of more stringent demands on our performance as a country committed to protecting all citizens from poverty.

The response in the mid and late seventies seemed to have confirmed this pessimistic diagnosis. A political party was returned to power in 1979 which had in effect announced its intention to solve the problem by disavowing governmental responsibility for it. Poverty, according to the resurgent doctrine of market liberalism, was a problem for the private sector. The duty of government was to diminish itself, to release the powers of enterprise, to encourage the creation of

wealth and so to reduce poverty. It is probably significant that Mrs Thatcher's government was first elected by a people which had revealed itself in international studies in 1976 as the one among all the peoples of Europe which was most inclined to blame the poor for their poverty, to see the causes of poverty in failures of individual character and exertion rather than in imperfection or incompleteness of the welfare services.

What, then, is the prospect surveyed by Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley on the basis of the LWT/MORI poll of 1983 and their appraisal of current political and parliamentary debate? Time and opinion have moved on. Unemployment has multiplied massively since 1979 to become a national disaster. Poverty on the conventional definition of receipt of supplementary benefit has risen in melancholy harmony with the unemployment figures. Unemployment is plainly seen as a principle cause and its incidence is perceived as largely beyond the capacity of its victims to control. Public willingness to accept higher taxation so as to relieve poverty is less than either logic might decree or compassion invite: but public disapproval of the social policies of the Conservative government has become the mood of the majority and seems to be reflected in less muted, more explicit opposition on the Conservative benches of the House of Commons.

The authors of this study welcome these recent shifts of attitude towards the poor. But that is not their most important purpose, nor the signal value of their book. Their more fundamental contribution lies in defining and measuring the extent of poverty in Britain today. That contribution can be the better appreciated if the history of how the poor have been conceived and counted is briefly recalled.

A hundred years ago controversy raged in Britain over the question of what proportion of the population was in poverty. The Marxist theory of an increasing polarization of society between bourgeois rich and proletarian poor was stridently asserted by H. M. Hyndman and the Social Democratic Foundation and supported by propagandist pamphleteering of which *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* is the best remembered. The liberal reaction, apart from Christian socialist active

concern, was to attempt precise measurement. Charles Booth's and later Rowntree's surveys were landmarks of charitably inspired but rationally disciplined measurement. That Booth confounded Hyndman only to be widely misreported by radical propagandists need not concern us here. What is important is that a submerged tenth was identified and that the criteria for defining poverty were essentially absolute. The idea of poverty in the minds of the liberal social investigators was that of an income sufficient to maintain bare subsistence by an individual or family practicing rigorously ascetic rationality in the spending of meagre resources.

The approach to measuring poverty through absolute definitions has, and will always have, utility. Such a definition offers a firm base on which to gauge trends, whereas a relativist approach in its simplest form (the x per cent with the lowest incomes) guarantees that the poor are always with us. But an absolute definition passes authority to some external judge - a physiologist or economist or medical expert - and ignores the subjective state of either the advantaged or the disadvantaged members of society. The relative approach strives for internal or participative judgement recognizing that we are 'members one of another'. Its notion of poverty is cultural. The poor are poor in comparison with other members of society. They are excluded from sharing in the normal life of their country. So a relative approach must be added for a full appraisal of poverty: and the rise of citizenship, together with the increasing visibility of variation in standards of living, gives further point to relativist descriptions.

It is here that the present book makes its relevant contribution. The authors have defined poverty by asking a cross-section of British people to specify what elements of material life they regard as necessary to minimal sharing in contemporary British society. The answers would have been different in Booth's time or in Cannes or Calcutta now. They reflect current British conceptions of the indispensable decencies. And it turns out that there is a high degree of consensus as to what these decencies are. Then, given the definition, it is a relatively simple task to count and map the poor, to describe what they

are denied, and to draw the correlates (of age, sex, occupation, education, and employment) which are associated with poverty. Finally, the authors use the survey to assess the attitudes of the nation to its poor and the willingness of the fortunate to relieve the unfortunate.

The book deserves wide attention. A minority believes that the Thatcher administration already has affected policies for a rich future in which the halt, the sick, and the lame will be properly cared for. Another minority seeks destruction of the social order followed by a new regime in which the welfare of all will be ensured. The majority is neither impressed by the Thatcher performance nor persuaded by the promise of revolution. On either path they fear the threat of a new polarization - a society divided between those who are and those who are not securely employed in a 'high tech' economy. Poverty always threatens the social order. The political challenge, now more urgent than ever, is to devise fair ways of distributing new plenitude from a new industrial revolution. Neither market liberalism nor Marxist revolution has plausible answers. The plight of the new poor needs patient democratic government for its relief. Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley offer one simple tool in the service of a complex machinery of social reintegration. Their yardstick of poverty makes sense of the way we now live. It constitutes a powerful indictment of present policy and offers a clear guide to the action required in a responsible democracy.

A. H. Halsey
Oxford
December 1984