

**Homeless Rough Sleepers and New Labour:
*'Can things only better'?***

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Issues for discussion

- **Setting the scene**
- **Who sleeps rough in the UK?**
- **The New Labour approach to rough sleeping**
- **Critique and conclusion**

Setting the scene

UK Policy responses toward rough sleepers move between seeing homelessness as resulting from:

- ***Structural causes***: result of socio-economic factors [poverty, lack of housing]
- ***Individual causes***
 - a) **'Personal inadequacy'**: provide assistance to function 'normally' required
 - b) **'Victim blaming'**: result of fecklessness and/or criminal predisposition
- **Recent research favours a combination of *unique personal biography* [care leaver etc] and *structural factors***
- **Reflected in legislation: 1977 *Homeless Persons Act*: homeless 'tests' of Priority need; local connection; intentionality**

1979-1997: Neglecting the homeless?

'The cause of the rise in homelessness is the result of the change in the ways people are behaving' [Ridley, Minister Housing 1987]

'These are the people one steps over on the way into the opera' [Young, Minister Housing, 1989]

'I insisted that whatever the government did to help, there must be a stick as well as a carrot. Crowds of drunken, dirty, often abusive and sometimes violent men must not be allowed to turn central areas of the capital into no-go zones for ordinary citizens. The police must disperse them and prevent them coming back once it was clear that accommodation was available.

Unfortunately, there was a persistent tendency in polite circles to consider all the 'roofless' as victims of middle class society rather than middle class society as victim of the 'roofless''

[Who said this.....?]

1997-to date: Reforming the homeless?

A welcome message:

***'The sight of a rough sleeper bedding down for the night in a shop doorway or on the park bench is one of the most potent symbols of social exclusion in Britain today'* [Blair, 1997]**

But clouds on the horizon.....

***'Blair was the most fundamentalist of the four Thatcherite prime ministers. From the moment he entered Downing Street he sought to govern in the manner of the forebear he most admired. He invited her to his new home two weeks after taking office, and before any other former leader, an act of honour and deference'* [Simon Jenkins, *Thatcher and Sons – A revolution in Three Acts*, 2006]**

'Homeless people have the means of their own salvation, but the barriers are within themselves. They have come to believe that life is a one way street, and they have a right to take from people and not give back' [Blair, 2001]

A very New Labour message telling us something about their philosophy of social welfare

'A new bargain for the unemployed, the basis of the modern civic society is an ethic of mutual responsibility or duty. It is something for something, a society where you play by the rules. You only take out if you put in. That's the bargain. The inherited system of welfare was responsible for encouraging dependency, lowering self esteem and denying opportunities and responsibility'

What can we learn from these quotes about New Labour vision for UK & European social welfare.....?

Who sleeps rough in the UK?

Quotes from research in London

Sid [60] Sleeps rough, occasional nights in B&B, has to leave because of behaviour in drink. Social worker described him as having multiple problems 'beyond labels': psychoses, alcohol, forensic history, poor relations with statutory agencies

John [67] served in the merchant navy and has slept rough for 7 years: *'He'll accept cups of tea and food but when it comes to accommodation and benefits he feels that he's not entitled to it. We were able to persuade him to use emergency shelters in the winter & when ill'* [outreach worker]

Jeff [71] was 11 when his mother died & was placed in an institution. Moved to London and worked as a road sweeper. After drinking heavily he was admitted to hospital, post discharge he continued to drink & moved into BB but was bullied by younger residents - eventually slept rough

Sue [40] left her husband after suffering domestic violence for many years. She moved into a local authority homeless person's hostel but felt threatened by residents who drank and took drugs: *'I lived there for a while and then decided it was safer on the streets. Eventually I was moved into a flat. People on the estate terrorized me, demanding money and I was burgled 3 times'*. Sue then moved into a supported housing

Nancy [45] in the past maintained independent housing, evicted because of behaviour. Since on merry go round of B&B, night-shelters, street

Multiple problems: History of sexual abuse, prostitution, substance abuse, mild learning disability, mental health problems - is in contact with the 'street homelessness team'

What are some of the practice issues for Sid, Nancy etc?

Characteristics:

- **Around 10,000 sleep rough annually**
- **Predominantly male over 25**
- **25%-33% institutional care background**
- **50% reliant on alcohol**
- **20% drug misuse**
- **30%-50% serious mental health problems**
5% from an ethnic minority
- **Location: bigger cities & increasingly rural areas**

Homelessness risk factors:

- ❖ **Abuse as a child**
- ❖ **Gender**
- ❖ **Sexuality**
- ❖ **Household type**
- ❖ **Family dispute**
- ❖ **Being in care [around 40% of homeless people]**
- ❖ **Offending history**
- ❖ **Institutional background [prison etc]**
- ❖ **Drug or alcohol abuse**
- ❖ **Mental / physical health problems**

Triggers

- **Leaving home**
- **Relationship breakdown**
- **Widowhood**
- **Leaving care, armed forces, prison**
- **Deterioration in mental health**
- **Debt and financial crisis**

The New Labour approach to rough sleeping

- **Reduce rough sleeping by 2/3 by 2002**
- **Prevent the causes of homelessness**
- **Target the most 'vulnerable'**
- **'Joined up approaches'**
- **'Assertive' outreach, extra hostel provision, and tenancy support as a 'continuum of care' from 'streets to home'**
- **Beds for those in most need 'so those capable of helping themselves didn't perceive it as a fast-track into housing'**
- **Police the voluntary sector: end many street projects; discourage giving to 'non-genuine' street homeless' and reject approaches sustaining a 'street homelessness culture'**
- **Legislation: Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 responsibility for 16-18 year olds [21 in education] / Homelessness Act 2002**
- **Welfare to Work**

'Responsible' the homeless:

“The government believe that if their needs can be provided through one or other of the accommodation, treatment or support routes that we are funding, rough sleepers themselves have a responsibility to expect those working on the streets to seek to persuade people to take advantage of them. This includes the police, who sometimes have not been able to use their powers because of a lack of options to move rough sleepers onto” (RSU, 1999:16)

Critiques of New Labour

- Early New Labour:

'The sight of a rough sleeper bedding down for the night in a shop doorway or on the park bench is one of the most potent symbols of social exclusion in Britain today'

- Late New Labour: 'ethic of tough love':

'The Government believes the public will expect hostel places to be taken up as more become available and the police have often said they would be willing to take a more directive approach with rough sleepers if there were somewhere to take them and a co-ordinated approach'

- Barrier to investment & modernisation:

'The Government has no present plans to change the powers in respect of rough sleepers or make it an offence to sleep rough. But since the explicit intention of the policy is to deliver clear streets,

the Government believes that the public will feel they have a right to expect hostel places to be taken up as more become available' [Blunkett, 2002]

- ***American ideas: shelters for 'service resilient' homeless; police outreach / 'social work coercive' team; not compulsion but 'social coercion'***

- ***'Social' to 'criminal justice' problem:***

'It is right to intolerant of street homelessness on the streets' [Blair, 2000] re-criminalising of vagrancy

- ***'Non compliant' rough sleepers projected into criminal justice system [e.g. begging]***

- ***New 'moral and political culture' - responsibility; zero tolerance of 'threats' to community; homelessness as 'deviancy' rather than an 'indicator of inequality'***

- **Attack street level work for those who don't 'engage' [e.g. soup runs]**
- **Advert campaigns**
- **'Homelessness audit' using CCTV, Police & council staff to identify homeless people: [DNA/photos, fingerprinted, arrested]**
- **Homelessness & community safety**

Conclusion

- **Formal services still fail to meet needs or expectations**
- **Many are alienated / distrustful of agencies**
- **No simple solution: but focusing on criminalisation obscures the complexity/ reinforces exclusion**