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New Labour, Social Exclusion and Children

When New Labour came to power in May 1997 it presented itself as wanting to introduce a new political philosophy and strategy based on the ideas of the 'Third Way' (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 1998). The approach claimed to transcend the Thatcherite free-market model of the neoliberal state and the old-style socialism of both the Soviet command economy and the 'Old Labour' variety of the post-war period, with its emphasis on a universal, collectivist welfare state. The globalized nature of the market economy was accepted as a given, together with the assumption that the nation state could do very little to influence it. Rather than intervene in the economy on the demand side, as with the 'Old Labour' Keynesian approach, the emphasis was to be on improving the supply side. In the context of increased economic globalization, the 'Third Way' argued that national competitiveness and prosperity were crucially dependent on the skills and knowledge of the workforce, which needed to be flexible, adaptable and educated. Instead of job security, the new aim was 'employability', which would aid both economic performance and social cohesion.

At the centre of the New Labour project was an emphasis on the need to establish a new set of values. 'The Third Way is a serious reappraisal of social democracy, reaching deep into the values of the Left to develop radically new approaches' (Blair, 1998: 3). Along with the mantra of 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime', there was a commitment to the notion of 'no rights without responsibilities'. There was an insistence that rights implied responsibilities, and that benefits entailed contributions, for it was asserted that the social citizenship created by the post-war welfare state had a one-sided emphasis on rights. Collective protection in the context of 'social' security was to be replaced by a greater emphasis on individualized compulsion, training and support. Thus, while people had a right to security, job opportunities and a stable community, they also had a responsibility to act honestly, not violate the rights of other citizens and actively participate in the work-force.

In addition, the role of the state should shift its focus from *compensating* people for the 'diswelfares' they might have experienced as a consequence of the market to investing much more directly and strategically in human capital,

so that individuals could compete in the market. Such a social investment perspective frames social policy expenditures as investments rather than expenditures, with the aim of increasing future dividends and improving the economic value and competitiveness of the population by, in particular, improving systems of education and providing income supplements to 'make work pay' and thereby reduce dependency (Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2005). Social spending in the past is characterized as too passive, too present-oriented and insufficiently *focused on anticipated returns on investment.* The term 'social investment state' was coined by Anthony Giddens when he argued that:

> The guideline is investment in *human capital* wherever possible, rather than the direct provision of economic maintenance. In place of the welfare state we should put the *social investment state,* operating in the context of a positive welfare society (Giddens, 1998: 117, original emphasis).

While calling for a new partnership between families, markets and states, Giddens also challenged the state to develop an entrepreneurial approach which would encourage positive risk taking. Thus security would come from the capacity of the individual to change, which required investing in human capital and lifelong learning. The role of social investment was to encourage a level of skill and flexibility suited to the labour markets of global capitalism and an ability to withstand and positively negotiate the increasing stresses and complexities of daily life. For social spending to be effective, therefore, it should not be consumed by current needs but should focus on future benefits. The balance of welfare spending should therefore shift from social security to services that are explicitly preventive, promotional, positive and future oriented – particularly health and education.

In this context, the section of the population that would most benefit from investment for the future is children, particularly very young children. As Tony Blair argued in his Beveridge lecture, where he made a commitment to abolish child poverty within 20 years, there needed to be a refocusing of the objectives and operation of the welfare state:

> If the knowledge economy is an aim then work, skill and above all investing in children become essential aims of welfare … we have made children our top priority because, as the Chancellor memorably said in his budget, 'they are 20 per cent of the population, but they are 100 per cent of the future' (Blair, 1999: 16).

In a context where social investment for the future in order to compete in the global market was the top priority, policies in relation to children and childhood thus lay at the heart of the New Labour project to refashion the welfare state.

New Labour and Modernization

If New Labour presented its strategy in terms of the 'Third Way', the manner it characterized its approach was in terms of a process of 'modernization' whereby the key elements of both the state and civil society would be renewed to make them 'fit for purpose' for the globalized economy (Cabinet Office, 1999; Department of Health, 1998a). It aimed to increase opportunity and strengthen community by combining both liberal individualism and a conservative communitarianism (Driver and Martell, 1997).

New Labour drew on a version of *communitarianism* informed by the American sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1993; 1997). Appeals to community were seen as a focus for moral renewal, asserting the need to restore to communities their moral voices and requiring a much greater sense of individual responsibility towards others. Communitarianism attempts to reactivate the institutions of civil society, particularly schools and families, into vibrant forms of social regulation and opportunity. However, New Labour's main preoccupation has not been the centrality of marriage, the unity of the couple or even the permanence of parental relationships, as clearly the nature of 'family' and 'family practices' had changed considerably during the previous generation. The focus of policy has thereby shifted from the nuclear family to an approach that is concerned with childhood vulnerability and well-being and, crucially, upholding 'parental responsibility' (Lewis, 2001).

The approach is premised on the idea that our initial moral commitments are derived from the families and communities into which we are born, and are reinforced by other forms of community membership. The community is conceptualized as a key site for both explaining and intervening in a range of social problems. Strategies should thereby be developed to link individuals to their communities, and central to these are attempts to enhance connections to the labour market and ensure that the control and discipline of children by their parents is strengthened so that they are brought up appropriately. However, while appealing to the spirit of an idealized working-class community, because the community was rediscovered in the context of moral panic about the collapse of order and the growing lawlessness of the young following the murder of Jamie Bulger, it was necessary for the state to actively take the lead in reinvigorating communities.

New Labour's emphasis on modernization has also been heavily influenced by the *new public management approach* first introduced in the mid-1980s (Horton and Farnham, 1999). Originally, under the Conservative government, the primary impetus was to rein in public expenditure and introduce some of the disciplines of the private sector, particularly via the introduction of the quasi-market and the contract culture into public services. However, the Conservative changes were not simply concerned with trying to improve 'economy, efficiency and effectiveness', but also emphasized the need to make the actions of professionals and the

services they provided more 'transparent' and 'accountable' (Power, 1997). What occurred was a significant shift towards giving managers the right to manage, instituting a whole variety of systems of regulation to achieve value for money and thereby producing accountability to the taxpayer and the government on the one hand, and to the customer and the user on the other (Clarke et al., 2000).

Under New Labour, the changes became even more rapid and intensive with the promulgation of a range of new performance targets, inspection regimes and league tables, with the avowed intent to maximize 'best value' and improve effectiveness. The process of 'audit' increased inexorably (Munro, 2004a; C. McDonald, 2006). Indicators and targets have been used to both drive and measure improvement (Newman, 2001; Martin, 2005). The techniques are built upon the positivist assumption that 'performance', 'outputs' or 'outcomes' can be measured in an objective, invariable, quantified manner (Tilbury, 2004, 2005; McAnulla, 2007).

However, New Labour's 'modernization' also had a clear normative inflection in that it was used to designate ways in which the institutions of government and public services must change to respond to the social changes prompted by globalization and the demands of the individualized citizen-consumer. In doing so, the approach has emphasized the importance of rational and scientific approaches in order to get rid of the 'traditional, old-fashioned' practices of the past. In the future, practice should be based on evidence of 'what works' and best outcomes.

In the process, research and evaluation have been drawn upon to set standards and criteria whereby performance can be measured. While this is used to measure the performance of organizations and practitioners, it is also used to measure the behaviour of the people with whom they work. Such an approach became increasingly evident in the field of children's social care, which had been tested in the first instance with the 'Looking After Children' (LAC) project. For example, the *Quality Protects* (QP) programme (Department of Health, 1998b), implemented between 1998 and 2003 as a means, primarily, of improving the standards of local authority 'corporate parenting', had a set of specified child welfare outcome measures defined in terms of developmental progress and educational attainment and linked to various organizational targets and indicators. A similar process was evident in the development of *Sure Start*. The performance of managers, practitioners and parents was thereby inextricably linked and subject to continual monitoring and evaluation.

Closely associated with the growth of managerialism, and central to the process of 'modernization', has been an emphasis on *joined-up government* in order to address particularly 'wicked problems'. For 'to improve the way we provide services, we need all parts of government to work together better. We need joined-up government. We need integrated government' (Cabinet Office, 1999: 5). The idea of *partnership* has been a central theme for New Labour in that it exemplifies the drive to move beyond the old ways of organizing public services in 'silos'.

The importance of partnership and inter-agency coordination had been a key recommendation of all child abuse inquiries since 1973 and was at the centre of the Children Act 1989. However, New Labour saw such approaches as being fundamental to its whole approach to government, and a key element which made its approach politically distinctive (Glendinning et al., 2002).

> The Third Way recognizes the limits of government in the social sphere, but also the need for government within those limits, to forge new partnerships with the voluntary sector. Whether in education, health, social work, crime prevention or the care of children, 'enabling' government strengthens civil society rather than weakening it, and helps families and communities improve their own performance. … New Labour's task is to strengthen the range and quality of such partnerships (Blair, 1998: 14).

Networks of a variety of agencies drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors have been heralded as alternatives to approaches based on either traditional bureaucracies or markets and are seen as the bedrock of a new form of governance (Clarke and Glendinning, 2002). While partnership can be seen to exemplify an approach which aims for pragmatic solutions to practical policy problems, partnerships are also intrinsically associated with networked forms of governance, where information and communication technologies (ICTs) are seen to play a key transformational role in developing new ways of ordering the new and complex governmental systems (Rhodes, 1997). The development of *electronic government* is seen as key to the process of modernization (Hudson, 2002, 2003) where the introduction of a range of new ICTs is given high priority. This has been encouraged by a variety of mutually reinforcing features of New Labour policy.

These include the development of social intervention programmes involving a focus on extremely small neighbourhoods, groups or individuals; a shift towards holistic, multi-agency approaches to such interventions; the establishment of ambitious social policies at a time of continuing resource constraint; government's response to administrative discretion in a policy context calling for more finely-judged selectivity; and the desire to base interventions on more precise evidence (Perri et al., 2005: 112–13).

Such developments provide a particular challenge to practitioners for, aside from the technical problems involved in their implementation, there is a significant tension. For while such technologies are particularly associated with strengthening the capacities for governmental surveillance, and there is an emphasis on the importance of sharing citizens' personal information between different public services, there is also an increased expectation that citizens' rights and privacy will be respected (Bellamy et al., 2005; Surveillance Studies Network, 2006).

These issues have been sharpened by the emphasis New Labour places on the importance of *prevention* and *early intervention.* As we noted earlier, New Labour has been keen to develop a much more proactive approach in order to address problems before they occur and before they become chronic. Not only would this be better for the individuals concerned, but it would provide considerable financial savings. An emphasis on *positive welfare* (Giddens, 1994, 1998, 2000) aimed to move beyond focusing on the negative problems, identified in the Beveridge Report (1944), of 'want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness', and saw welfare as a crucial component in promoting both economic growth and individual well-being.

Such an approach borrows many of its concepts and technologies of calculation and intervention from the public health model, with its emphasis on primary, secondary and tertiary prevention (Freeman, 1992, 1999). In the process universal benefits which individuals previously received on the basis of their citizenship rights are reconceptualized as primary services designed to maximize their health, well-being and employment. More significantly, the approach attempts to identify 'at risk' groups or individuals in the population and engage in early intervention before the onset of problems or to prevent the problems getting worse. Simply treating everyone the same and waiting for the crisis to occur is simply not adequate; *targeting* 'at risk' populations or individuals on the basis of their extra needs or vulnerabilities via early intervention becomes a key strategy for improving individual and social health in the future.

We discussed in the previous chapter how research related to 'early childhood prevention' was increasingly being taken seriously in policy debates in the 1990s. What France and Utting (2005) call the 'risk and protection-focussed prevention paradigm' provided a key rationale and framework for developing a number of initiatives for children and parents in the first New Labour government, including the 'Sure Start' programme, 'On Track' and projects funded by the 'Children's Fund'. In its second term there was an explicit effort to make prevention a central focus for mainstream services. For example, in September 2003 the then Minister for Young People, John Denham, announced that the government was requiring local authorities to develop coordinated local plans for the implementation of preventive strategies for children and their families. He articulated his belief that early identification of risks and problems should become a core activity for children's services.

> The local preventative strategy should set a framework for services, through which effective support can be provided at the most appropriate level and point in time. At all levels of service (universal, targeted, specialist and rehabilitative) *the aim should be early intervention, in response to the assessment of risk and protective factors,* to improve the outcomes of the children they serve (Children and Young People's Unit [CYPU], 2002, para. 1.3, emphasis added).

The guidance to local authorities also said that:

> By addressing the risk factors that make children and young people vulner-able to negative outcomes, such as being excluded from school, running away from home or by becoming involved in crime, the local preventative strategy will set the direction for services to reduce *social exclusion* (CYPU, 2002, para. 1.2, emphasis added).

Finally, no discussion of New Labour would be complete without reference to issues of image and news management (Franklin, 2003) which have had a profound impact on both the nature of policies and how they are presented to the media and the wider public. A preoccupation with language has frequently distracted attention, often by design, from more constructive approaches (Fairclough, 2000). In the process there has been a continual tension between short-termism – where government is seen as responding to 'public opinion' – and the longer term 'modernization' project. As a consequence New Labour has not seemed confident in the face of high profile 'bad news' stories and has wanted to be seen as authoritative and 'tough'. Such concerns have been particularly evident in the arenas of criminal justice, immigration and asylum where New Labour has been keen to be seen as *the* political party of 'law and order'.

Combating Social Exclusion

While the overall approach of New Labour social policy emphasized the idea of 'social investment' and should therefore focus on future benefits, it also recog-nized it was important to address certain current needs and problems. Where the focus was on present needs, this should be targeted on those sections of the pop-ulation who were marginalized and posed a threat to social cohesion, either now or in the future. A focus on addressing social exclusion was thus a necessary cur-rent expenditure and a central plank in its approach to social policy, reflecting many of the themes, principles and tensions in the New Labour approach.

One of the first acts of the New Labour government, in December 1997, was to establish the Social Exclusion Unit with a strategic relationship to all govern-ment departments and located in the Cabinet Office, thus putting it 'at the heart of government'. It produced a wide range of reports on, for example, school exclusion, deprived neighbourhoods, unemployment, drug use, teenage preg-nancy and the reintegration of ex-offenders into society.

There were a number of underlying assumptions which informed the New Labour approach to exclusion from the outset. Firstly, social exclusion was seen as emerging from the major changes arising from increased globalization which led to a loss of many extraction and manufacturing jobs and which contributed

to the collapse of many traditional working class communities and thereby their cultures and values:

> We came into office determined to tackle a deep social crisis. We had a poor record in this country in adapting to social and economic change. The result was sharp income inequality, a third of children growing up in poverty, a host of social problems such as homelessness and drug abuse, and divisions in society typified by deprived neighbourhoods that had become no go areas for some and no exit zones for others. All of us bore the cost of social breakdown directly, or through the costs to society and public finances. And we were never going to have a successful economy while we continued to waste the talents of the many (Blair, 2001: 1).

Secondly, social exclusion was seen as a series of linked problems. It did not simply arise because of a lack of money but referred to what happens when 'people or areas suffer from a combination of problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001, p. 11); it was thus necessary to respond in a 'joined-up' way. Thirdly, social exclusion was addressed in the context of an emphasis on rights and responsibilities, whereby government makes 'help available but requires a contribution from the individual and the community' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001, p. 3).

A particular emphasis was placed on getting people into paid work. Key policies included the introduction of the national minimum wage and alterations to taxes and benefits to increase the incentives to enter the labour market through tax credit and with support for child care through the national child care strategy. At the centre of government policy on jobs was the New Deal, with its various special programmes for distinct groups, including young people, single parents and the long-term unemployed. While opportunities were offered, a life on long-term benefit was not seen as an option for most. Much stricter tests of availability for work were introduced and 'unemployment benefit' was changed to 'jobseeker's allowance'. Budgets also contained some redistributionist measures through a series of 'stealth taxes' which tended to benefit the working poor at the expense of the middle classes.

Addressing social exclusion, however, was not only concerned with trying to get people into work, for it was also intimately concerned with improving behaviour and social functioning. A variety of factors associated with certain individuals, families and communities were seen as putting certain people 'at risk' of social exclusion: poor parenting; truancy; drug abuse; lack of facilities; homelessness; as well as unemployment and low income. In particular, an attack on social exclusion also required an attack on the causes of crime as well as crime itself. The behaviour of children and young people was seen as being in need of attention and, in particular, it was important that parents took their

responsibilities seriously. As we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, the introduction of parental control orders, curfew orders and a general concern with 'anti-social behaviour' have all been given a high priority, together with the major reform of policy and practice in relation to youth offending.

However, rather than increase social inclusion, a number of these policies can have the effect of increasing exclusion, for there is a 'contradiction between zero tolerance and criminalising anti-social behaviour on the one hand and the welfarist, rehabilitative philosophy underlying some of the government's youth justice and prison policies' (Hoyle and Rose, 2001: 80). In part, such tensions arose because New Labour has always had a strong populist dimension, which is particularly prevalent in the way it approaches issues associated with crime and also immigration and asylum (Morris, 2001).

What we have, therefore, is a particular model of social exclusion which sees the challenges of globalization as resulting in problems of social cohesion brought about by those who have been left behind by economic change:

> It presents 'society' as experiencing a rising standard of living by defining those who have not done so, who have become poorer, as excluded from society, as 'outside it' (Levitas, 1996: 7).

As a result, policy has been less concerned with redistribution to aid social and material equality and more concerned with integration, either by getting people into work and reattaching them to the labour market or by altering the behaviour and characteristics of the excluded themselves. Those who, for whatever reasons, are resistant are subject to increased regulation and discipline (Veit-Wilson, 1998; Byrne, 2005). The emphasis is on equality of opportunity, not outcome.

Ruth Levitas (1996, 2005) has argued that New Labour's explanation and approach to social exclusion reflects a 'new Durkheimian hegemony' which sees deprivation and inequality as peripheral phenomena occurring at the margins of society and ignores forms of domination that structure the lives of the excluded and included alike. For New Labour, poverty and disadvantage, as Durkheim argued, are symptoms not of the capitalist market economy, but of pathological deviations from what is essentially a fair and harmonious society. Such a conception of social exclusion implies minimalist reform and is concerned with 'exclusion from access to the ladders of social improvement' (Kruger, 1997: 20) and not a problem relating to 'the length of the ladder or the distance between the rungs' (Levitas, 2005: 153). Similarly, Goodwin notes that 'couching the argument in terms of "inclusion of the excluded" constitutes an argument for pushing them "just over" the line. They remain borderline' (Goodwin, 1996: 348).

Levitas argued that the New Labour approach to social exclusion was poised between the influences of two major discourses. The first, what she calls the *social integrationist discourse* (SID), stresses the importance of moral integration and

social cohesion, and regards the economy in general and paid work in the labour market, in particular, as the necessary means for achieving this. What is absent is any serious recognition of the existence and value of alternative modes of social integration outside the ambit of economic relations of exchange. There is little acknowledgement of the social contribution made by unpaid workers, notably by women, and a failure to address the way paid work for many does not provide a strong source of social identity, discipline and self-esteem. This is particularly the case for many males with the collapse of the traditional manufacturing and mining industries.

The second discourse identified by Levitas, the *moral underclass discourse* (MUD), deploys cultural rather than material explanations of social exclusion and was particularly associated with the work of Charles Murray in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Murray, 1990, 1994). Murray had argued that an underclass had long existed in the United States, but was now spreading in Britain. He likened it to a 'contagious disease' which was spread by people whose values were contaminating the life of whole communities by rejecting both the work ethic and the family ethic which were central to the mainstream culture. Importantly, not all the poor were part of such an underclass and were keen to strengthen their links with the mainstream and take advantage of the opportunities available to them. According to Murray, the existence of an underclass could be diagnosed by three symptoms: illegitimacy; crime; and dropping out from the labour force.

> If illegitimate births are the leading indicator of an underclass and violent crime is a proxy measure of its development, the definitive proof that an underclass has arrived is that large numbers of young, healthy, low-income males choose not to take jobs (Murray, 1990: 17).

These three factors, Murray argued, interacted to produce pathological communities in which the socialization of children, especially boys, was inadequate. The absence of fathers meant there was a lack of role models, particularly for boys, who then felt driven to prove their masculinity in destructive ways. The benefits system encouraged a culture of idleness and welfare dependency, where family structures and socialization processes had broken down and where only a reinforcement of the work ethic, achieved by means of a continual tightening of the benefit eligibility criteria, could reintegrate the excluded into mainstream society. Such an approach has certain similarities to the communitarianism of Amitai Etzioni, and would support approaches which aimed to emphasize 'no rights without responsibilities' and being 'tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime'.

Levitas also outlines a third discourse on social exclusion, which she terms the *redistributionist discourse* (RED) and which had its roots in the critical social policy literature, particularly of Peter Townsend (1971), a number of

publications from the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) (Golding, 1986; Lister, 1990; Walker and Walker, 1997) and other writers on the left (Jordan, 1996). Such an approach recognized

> their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, *excluded* from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities (Townsend, 1971: 32, emphasis added).

The prime cause of social exclusion was seen as arising from the increasing inequalities of income, wealth and power. The solutions proposed were explicitly redistributive and included increasing taxation on the rich, a reduced reliance on means-tested benefits and that benefits should be paid primarily on the basis of citizenship rights. While a redistribution of resources in terms of income and wealth was important, the analysis recognized the increasing social divisions evident in housing, health and the workplace, including a range of fringe benefits received at work. Social exclusion was explicitly located in wider issues of power. While New Labour has engaged in some redistribution via the tax system, this has been minimal. Such an approach recognizes that the problem of social exclusion was as much, if not more, to do with the behaviour and life style of the rich as it was to do with that of the poor and must therefore be subject to change.

New Labour's Policy for Children and Families

While all three discourses on social exclusion identified by Levitas have played some role in informing New Labour policy towards children and families, it is the first two, the social integrationist discourse (SID) and the moral underclass discourse (MUD), which have dominated. New Labour's policies in relation to children and families are located in the priority given to emphasizing 'social investment' in order to compete in the increasingly globalized economic order, and to combat social exclusion. The latter is addressed primarily in terms of providing more opportunities and encouragements for paid work while trying to modify the life styles and behaviours of those who are not able to do so, together with ensuring they do not undermine the rights of others and in the process engage in crime and other anti-social behaviour. Policies in relation to children and families have been at the core of New Labour's social programme.

Since coming to power, New Labour has introduced a plethora of new policies and made significant changes to other long-established ones (see Millar and Ridge, 2002; Skinner, 2003; Pugh and Parton, 2003; Fawcett et al., 2004). These have included:

- *General support for all parents with children,* including increasing the value of child benefits, the introduction of children's tax to replace the married

couple's tax allowance, the introduction of a national child care strategy, improving maternity and paternity leave.
• *Specific and targeted support for poor families with children,* including the introduction of the working tax credit, the child tax credit and the child care tax credit; the special services to aid welfare-to-work under the New Deal initiatives where personal advisors give practical advice and support and there is considerable encouragement and finances available to enter the labour market or take up training.
• *Initiatives specifically targeted at disadvantaged children who are 'at risk' of being socially excluded,* particularly the Sure Start programme, Connexions, and the Children's Fund.

Taking these initiatives together, we can see that New Labour has placed a high priority on supporting 'hard working families' (Williams, 2005) by: encouraging and rewarding parental involvement in employment; attacking poverty, particularly amongst lone parents and other low-income families; providing the basis for a prosperous and competitive economy; and acting as the role model that parents can provide for their children.

At the same time there is a considerable emphasis on the 'responsibilization' of parents. Not only are entitlements and support conditional on the exercise of proper individual responsibility, but adults with children carry extra responsibilities. The idea of 'parental responsibility' lies at the centre of a range of policies in the broad criminal justice, education, health and child welfare areas. 'Parental responsibility' is not only concerned with ensuring that children attend and achieve at school, but that they do not engage in criminal or anti-social behaviour, and that their health and development are fully supported. Parents are seen to play a central role in creating the 'hard working' and 'pro-social' adults of the future.

Conclusion

We can thus see New Labour as drawing on a number of diverse elements to produce a distinctive approach to social policy and its attempts at social and economic renewal more generally. Perhaps its most distinctive characteristic has been its attempt to combine an emphasis on both liberal individualism and conservative communitarianism. Some have gone as far as to suggest that such a 'liberal-communitarian' policy mix is supported by a variety of coalitions which rule a large number of the major EU member states, whichever party is dominant, while recognizing that the detail and balance of the policy mix will vary (Jordan, 2006a). The approach has brought together an emphasis on the importance of individual autonomy and the mobility of market relations with elements of a socially conservative view of the family and civil society, particularly in terms of its emphasis on 'responsibility'.

It assumes that individuals aim to maximize their utility within a set of institutions – families, markets, polities – inherited from earlier generations but constantly renewed in their interactions. The approach has also sought to erode or transform the collectivist legacy of the Keynesian period. It is assumed that not only do individuals want more consumer freedoms and choices but that they will also be required to become more independent and self-reliant than they had been in the welfare state era. Instead of expecting collective solutions to issues of the life cycle, the economic cycle, change and crisis, they are required to develop personal resources and material property to cope with all eventualities.

Increasingly, New Labour has been keen to give more scope to individuals to choose among a range of alternative amenities and providers in terms of hospitals, schools and social care resources, and has encouraged citizens to develop strategies for finding the 'best' facilities. In particular the 'choice agenda' has been promoted as the key mechanism for improving competition and thereby driving up quality in public services (Jordan, 2005; 2006b; Clarke et al., 2006), particularly at the beginning of its third term of government following its re-election in May 2005. For example, increased freedoms for and greater differentiation between schools, particularly secondary schools, were seen as a major way of improving the performance of the schools themselves and the academic achievements of their students.

While presented as a coherent and logical mix of principles and policy developments, the potential for tensions and contradictions cannot be underestimated. In particular it cannot be assumed that an emphasis on greater individualism, choice and personal responsibility in order to encourage greater innovation and competition in the global economy will not undermine attempts to increase a sense of community cohesion and national solidarity. The emphasis on the need to maximize our ability to attract foreign capital by keeping taxation low in order to ensure the UK, and London in particular, becomes a global centre of finance may increase social inequality and thereby undermine attempts to improve social inclusion. These are important issues, which we will return to in the final section of the book. What is clear is that policies towards children have been a key focus for social policy change by New Labour, and it is to these we turn in the next chapter.