

Child poverty

It was 21 years ago that the Prime Minister, then Tony Blair, announced the target that child poverty would be eliminated by 2020. Of course Blair could not have foreseen the economic crisis of 2008 or the COVID pandemic of today, both of which actually increased the level of child poverty, but even without these massive shocks to the system we would still have been a very long way from achieving his target.

The House of Commons Education Select Committee is conducting an inquiry into left behind white working class pupils, and last Tuesday held the second of its evidence sessions. The committee has stumbled across what is one of the most important issues that touches education, that of child poverty.

The reasons for it, and for its continuing growth, are not just, or even mainly, to be found in education. They go much deeper than that. Others, such as the Children's Commissioner for England, the National Children's Bureau and academics like those from the University of Plymouth, whose Dr Alex Gibson was giving evidence to the select committee, have long championed this cause. It should not come as a surprise to anyone, for it is not new. It has been with us for a long while. Yet it is an issue hiding in plain sight.

The evidence given to the committee has still been instructive. A member of the committee, the Labour MP Ian Mearns, noted the growing problem of children coming to school who cannot use a knife and fork, are not potty trained and have not reached the developmental level others take for granted at the age when they are coming into an educational establishment. One of the witnesses, Jonathan Douglas, chief executive of the National Literacy Trust, replied: "That perspective is absolutely right. Our programmes frequently work with families whose children are starting school not recognising their own name when it is spoken."

The committee's chairman, the Conservative MP Robert Halfon, who had been a junior minister at the Department for Education, tried to get to the bottom of what the cause of white working class underperformance was, but he found it frustrating that all his witnesses would not give him the answers he wanted. In their view, it was not so much the under-performance of white working class disadvantaged people, a group that Dr Gibson observed were "not particularly white". The core of the problem was poverty. Some communities that had suffered poverty, poor housing and poor job prospects over several generations were white working class, but it was not their ethnicity that was the core of the problem but their poverty. There were additional layers of disadvantage that they suffered, in some parts of the north and elsewhere, which is why place was so important a factor, but it was poverty that was the key.

The period from the earliest part of a child's life was crucial. As Jonathan Douglas observed, "the impact of the earliest moments of a child's life is disproportionate to the investment and opportunities at any other point, yet perversely the system privileges later stages of education above those early stages. Yes, there is a perverse logic at work in the current funding arrangements."

The COVID pandemic has made a situation that has long existed far worse. It is good that the Government has announced an extra package of support to local authorities worth £400 million that will include a £170 million winter COVID grant that will allow local authorities to fund free school meals over Christmas, and beyond that through the half term and longer holidays to the summer. The Department for Education has been accident prone throughout the pandemic, with unforced errors and blunders over exams, cancelled funding for Unionlearn and now twice being forced into a U-turn over free school meals during holidays. But better late than never, I suppose.

Some will argue that it should not be the responsibility of the state to feed children, but of their parents. Yet free school meals is a relatively cheap and effective way of tackling food poverty among children and easing the burden of poverty on their parents. Tackling the growing problem of child poverty should surely be a high priority of state policy. If Tony Blair's aspiration of ending child poverty is ever to be met, then providing free school meals all year round, including during the

holidays, would be a useful step forward. In reality public support for the move the Government has just made championed by footballer Marcus Rashford is so high that it would be difficult for even a Tory government to reverse this latest announcement once the pandemic is over. They should not even try.