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Infantilised Parents and Criminalised Children: The Frame of Childhood in UK Poverty Discourse

Introduction

Over the last decade, UK Governments appear to have utilised various discursive frames of childhood to claim that they are tackling child poverty (despite putting in place no real measures to do so), and to shift the blame for poverty from their own decimation of structures for economic advancement and protection, to the so-called 'troubled' cultures of poor families. This chapter interrogates this policy climate and argues that part of what has allowed the Governments to justify and obfuscate their abandoning of poverty as a key policy focus was, and is, deployments of discourses of 'childhood.' The Coalition (2010-15) and Conservative (2015-) Governments, we argue, have mobilised two distinct discourses of childhood, simultaneously infantilising poor parents and adultifying poor children. Together, these somewhat contradictory processes suggest that the frame of childhood is central not only to the discourses that continue to blame the poor family for their own poverty, but also to the processes that have seen children and young people bear the brunt of a decade of austerity and anti-welfare politics in the UK. Evoking childhood to substantiate their spurious frames of 'worklessness' and 'troubled families', the austerity-era Governments have worked to move poverty discourse away from material and towards cultural and criminalised

understandings of poverty. Our chapter thus investigates these shifts with reference to the frame of childhood, focusing specifically on how 'childhood' is deployed as part of the individualisation, culturalisation, and criminalisation of disadvantage or poverty.

To make this argument we must first explain what we mean by childhood as a framing device. Here, childhood is understood as both a lived stage of life, and a figuration. As has been argued elsewhere, 'childhood' must be understood as a motivated term whose uneven distribution to individuals and populations facilitates various claims in and as the political (Berlant 1997; Castañeda 2002; Edelman 2004; Levander 2006; Bernstein 2011; Breslow 2019). In this conceptualisation, childhood is not just a description of a particular stage of life, nor an age group, but rather an expansive *and* constricting location within particular relationships of power. 'Childhood' often excludes many subjects within the early years of life, while simultaneously expanding outwards to 'stick' to older subjects. To be located within the frame of childhood, in other words, is less to be understood as within a particular age bracket, and more to be positioned as child-like, as contained by particular notions of ignorance, defenselessness, and sociality, as well as to be dependent on parental figures, state institutions, and the social world more generally. In this chapter, then, we address both 'real' and figurative children. Our concern is with the ways in which child poverty has been intentionally obfuscated by the austerity-era Governments as part of their anti-welfare politics, but also with the use of childhood as a frame to justify the policy and discursive mechanisms that facilitate this obfuscation.

Almost a decade after the beginning of austerity politics in the UK in 2010, the *impacts* of the raft of welfare and other policies implemented initially to reduce public spending by the Coalition Government are well known. The consequences of austerity policies have tended to fall disproportionately on the poorest and most disadvantaged in society, with black households, lone parents, and people with disabilities amongst the most severely affected (Portes and Reed 2017). Children have also been hit harder than other groups, as the poorest families with children have suffered the biggest losses in income, and families with children endured the largest cuts in services (Bradshaw 2016a). No doubt at least in part as a consequence of the reduced policy emphasis on child poverty discussed later, child poverty has been rising in the UK since 2011-12, with 4.1 million children living in poverty in 2017-18, 70 per cent of whom are in working families (CPAG 2019). The

increases follow a period of significant reductions between the mid-1990s and 2010 (Bradshaw and Main 2016), and the UK continues to underperform in international league tables on child well-being, particularly in regards to material well-being, education, and health (Bradshaw 2016b). For example, Taylor-Robinson et al. find that a third of 'the sustained and unprecedented rise in infant mortality in England from 2014 to 2017' can be attributed to rising child poverty, with the poorest areas of the country affected disproportionately while affluent areas remain largely unaffected (2019: 1).

Concomitant to these trends in the distribution of poverty and disadvantage, the austerity era has also seen considerable shifts and changes in how – and whether – poverty and child poverty are talked about within policy arenas. In this chapter we identify three key shifts in poverty discourse: the individualisation and culturalisation of poverty; the dropping of 'poverty' off the policy agenda altogether; and finally the convergence of poverty and criminality in both policy discourse and agendas. We suggest that the first two of these shifts are justified through infantilising discourses of poor parents, and that the latter shift is enabled through an adultification of poor children. Our chapter then concludes by suggesting that these shifts are indicative and telling of the wider decimation of state-provided universal support services over the austerity period, in favour of conditional programmes designed to offer limited and limiting support to those deemed 'troubled.'

From material to cultural poverty

As many (Gillies 2012; MacDonald et al. 2014; Main and Bradshaw 2016; Pemberton et al. 2016; Lehtonen 2018) have argued, discourses that position poor people as the architects of their own poverty have certainly intensified in the last decade. At the same time, the notion of 'cultural poverty', whereby the origins and causes of poverty are located in the *cultures* of poor people rather than in the economic and financial conditions that they face, has a long history in the UK. Conventionally, such discursive positionings cast poor and disadvantaged people as both culturally deficient and individually irresponsible, while social welfare is designated one of the causes of such dysfunction (Wiggan 2012). Given this longer history, it is no surprise that one of the central tactics deployed by recent UK Governments to avoid accountability for reducing child poverty has been to re-define what child poverty means. As

we outline later, this re-definition has sought to shift the discursive and policy terrain from material and economic indicators to cultural and familial dynamics.

In their first attempt to distance themselves from the previous Labour Government's flagship policy and commitment to eradicate child poverty in the UK by 2020[1], the Coalition Government consulted on 'better measures of child poverty' in 2012 (CPU 2012). The aim of the consultation was to replace the four child poverty targets introduced in the Child Poverty Act – related to relative, absolute, and 'persistent' poverty – with measures focusing on the 'root causes' of poverty instead (CPU 2012: 1). The process culminated in the passing of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, which commands the government to monitor and report on the number of children living in 'workless households' and 'long-term workless households', as well as on the educational attainment of all children and 'disadvantaged children' at the end of Key Stage 4. While the income-based measures are still published annually, the legal requirement for the government to meet specific child poverty reduction targets was removed in the 2016 act. In other words, the act effectively abolished the government's responsibility to report on and subsequently end child poverty by locating the source of economic disadvantage within cultural practices and behaviours in the family, rather than within material inequalities.

The replacement of the income-based measures with the 'worklessness' measures is not just a troubling rhetorical manoeuvre, but the measures are also misleading and inattentive to the realities of 'worklessness' as it relates to poverty. Specifically, they disregard the fact that out of the 14 million people who live in poverty in the UK, eight million live in families where at least one person is in work (JRF 2018), assuming instead that poverty can be successfully tackled simply by moving more people into employment. The claim that work is 'the best route out of poverty', repeated throughout the relevant policy papers (CPU 2012: 3; DWP 2017: 8), has been refuted by many (Bailey 2016; Main and Bradshaw 2016). Further, in regards to worklessness the policy focus has tended to be explicitly on the reproduction of the *norm* of worklessness from one generation to the next,

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[1] This aim was enshrined in legislation in the Child Poverty Act 2010, passed with cross-party support just a few months before the formation of the Coalition Government in 2010. The act established four income-based child poverty targets, as well as required the government to publish a regular child poverty strategy and annual progress reports, and initiated the setting up of the Child Poverty Commission to independently monitor governmental progress in eradicating child poverty.

rather than on the reproduction of the material conditions engendered by prolonged unemployment (Lehtonen 2018) – a notion at least partially disproven by Robert MacDonald et al.'s (2014) study that found no evidence of intergenerational cultures of worklessness in the UK. The focus on the normative nature of worklessness bolsters the idea that poverty and disadvantage are an issue for specific groups of people, who are trapped in a 'cycle of disadvantage' (DWP 2017: 8) or 'intergenerational cycles of poverty' (DfE 2011: 24) – thereby also ignoring the high levels of movement between categories (Bailey 2016). Thus, rather than something that can touch the lives of many individuals and families at various points in their lives, poverty is here transformed into an affliction of the few – and specifically, a few whose own values and norms are to blame for their deprivation.

Furthermore, the measures consulted on in 2012 and introduced in 2016 emphasise *behavioural* outcomes over material conditions, reproducing an individualised framing of poverty that views poor individuals as responsible for their own circumstances – as well as for lifting themselves out of them (Main and Bradshaw 2016; Pemberton et al. 2016). The emphasis on the cultural transmission of poverty also positions parents – rather than material or income poverty – as centrally responsible for their children's development and outcomes, suggesting that parents can ensure better futures for their children by simply passing on the right kind of cultural values, norms, and behaviours. The shift away from measuring, tracking, and basing policy on the income-based child poverty measures, thus, overall signals a move away from material and structural, and towards cultural and individual understandings of poverty, as well as reflects the notion that deprivation is both distinct and self-perpetuating (Gillies 2012).

From poverty to troubled families

Besides the culturalisation and individualisation of poverty, in recent times (child) poverty has, at least discursively, dropped off of the policy agenda of the Conservative Government(s) entirely. Following the passing of the Welfare Reform and Work Act in 2016, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) published a policy paper that sets out the Government's vision for 'tackling poverty and engrained disadvantage' (DWP 2017: 3). This paper constitutes the only one published by the DWP specifically on poverty or disadvantage since the 2016 Act,

and overall the paper serves both to intensify the discursive trends towards individualisation and culturalisation of poverty, and to move policy discourse away from poverty altogether.

In moving the emphasis away from poverty and towards, firstly, worklessness, and secondly, the ephemeral 'disadvantage' – which is, additionally, framed mostly as disadvantage in the labour market – the latest paper succeeds in presenting poverty and disadvantage as akin to *by-products* of the real problem, worklessness, rather than as warranting attention in their own right (Lehtonen 2018). The policy solutions offered as part of the 2017 paper's discussion reflect the prominent emphasis on workless families (rather than on *all* poor families) in governmental efforts to tackle poverty and disadvantage. Central to the policy interventions offered in the paper is the Troubled Families Programme (TFP), led by the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Eric Pickles and launched in 2012 with the aim to 'turn around' the lives of 120,000 families with multiple problems across England by May 2015' (DCLG 2016a: 5), increasing to 400,000 families in the second iteration of the programme running from 2015 to 2020 (DCLG 2016a). This programme, and the policy guidance that accompanies it, is the most recent incarnation of the policy and discursive landscape that blames poor families – now identified as both 'workless' *and* 'troubled' – for their own circumstances.

The second TFP was touted as having a 'renewed focus on worklessness' (DWP 2017: 18; cf. DCLG 2016a), with one of the programme's key goals being 'to make work an ambition for all troubled families' (MHCLG 2019: 7). As previously, the focus here is squarely on *attitudes* towards work, rather than on the income generated by work. Further, this focus on worklessness, specifically framed here as normative and cultural, as one of the key criteria for the programme raises the broader question of what and who is excluded when the Government's flagship programme to tackle disadvantage aims to only or primarily deal with *workless* families with multiple problems. Since a significant proportion of those living in poverty in the UK are actually in work, large numbers of poor people are excluded from the programme, and indeed from much intervention at all.[2] The limited reach of the

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[2] Apart from the TFP, the 2017 paper offers few solutions to tackling poverty and disadvantage. Universal Credit is touted as 'reforming the welfare system to make work pay' (DWP 2017: 15), and paid employment is also positioned centrally within almost all of the other solutions presented in the paper, including the solutions offered to people with disabilities or with drug and alcohol dependency (Lehtonen 2018).

programme thus belies the Government's disproportionate emphasis on the programme and its 'success' in 'turning around' troubled families. Indeed, the rhetoric around the programme claimed that 'significant progress' had been made, by the very fact that one or more adult in the families helped by the programme 'has succeeded in moving into continuous employment' (MHCLG 2018a: 7). Here, again, success is *not* defined by no longer being poor, but rather by being in work.

Like the category of 'worklessness', the framing of 'troubled families' produces gaps in meaning between what it allegedly speaks to and its rhetorical force. The ways in which the figures of 120,000 and 400,000 troubled families were arrived at, and subsequently used as the basis for policy, have faced significant criticism (Levitas 2012, 2014; Shildrick et al. 2016), not the least for the misrepresentation of the original piece of research that generated this figure, as is discussed in more detail later. In 2015 the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) claimed that an astonishing '99% of the actual number of families targeted', or '116,654 of the most troubled families', had been 'turned around' by the first TFP (DCLG 2015). However, research suggests that this figure was arrived at through some rather questionable manoeuvres.

Because the programme operates on a 'payment by results' principle, Levitas (2014) suggests that Local Authorities had an incentive to find and work with exactly the number of families given by the DCLG as an estimate of 'troubled families' in their area. A 2016 Channel 4 *Dispatches* documentary (*Dispatches* 2016) focusing on the programme suggests, further, that some councils were engaging in data matching – selecting families who had already had positive outcomes prior to the start of the programme as part of their target figure; replacing families that were unlikely to be 'turned around' with ones that allowed for 'quick wins'; and using such a wide definition of 'anti-social behaviour' (one of the key criteria of the programme) that families were being included as successes on rather flimsy grounds. Indeed, despite the early claim that 99 per cent of families on the programme had been turned around, the DCLG's own impact assessment of the first TFP stated: 'we were unable to find consistent evidence that the Troubled Families Programme had any significant or systematic impact' (DCLG 2016b: 49). In concentrating its efforts to tackle 'poverty and engrained disadvantage' (DWP 2017: 3) on a small number of 'troubled' families, rather than on poverty as such, the policy discourse around poverty has significantly shifted – to the

extent that it is questionable whether such a thing as 'poverty discourse', or indeed *child poverty discourse*', still exists in mainstream policy arenas in the UK. As we show in the following section, the shifts discussed in this chapter so far both rely on and produce a discursive framing of 'workless' parents as infantile subjects.

Infantilising 'Troubled' Families

Viewing poor families as distinct – and usually culturally so – from the rest of the population typically leads to an assumption that these groups also warrant specific policy attention, often in the form of policies that aim at behavioural change rather than at direct improvement in the financial circumstances of poor families. As we have now argued, and as Lehtonen has established elsewhere (2018), it is specifically in the family - and in specific families - that governmental interventions to tackle the 'entrenched problems' (DWP 2017: 21) and 'intergenerational cycle[s] of disadvantage' (DWP 2017: 8) faced by disadvantaged families and children are centred. More specifically, the relevant policy papers (CPU 2012; DWP 2017) have tended to focus their interventions on parental values, norms, and behaviours, thus contributing to the increasing 'parental determinism' (Gillies 2012; cf. De Benedictis 2012; Jensen 2012; Jensen and Tyler 2012) in policy-making in the austerity period. The Troubled Families Programme continues this trend, and here we want to highlight and interrogate some of the discursive framings of the notion of cultural poverty, arguing that it carries particular meanings that position families on the programme as infantile subjects.

The infantilisation of parents on the programme takes place at the level of both service delivery and rhetoric. The programme's mode of delivery has focused heavily on matching families with key workers, whose job it is to 'increase resilience by supporting with parenting, mental health issues, household budgeting, interparental relationships and any other significant issues that should be addressed' (MHCLG 2019: 9). The one-on-one support also includes more specialist services such as work coaches. While the funding of work coaches and key workers is not in and of itself a problem, what is of concern to us is the limited reach of these resources – only particular families, designated as 'troubled', are assigned them – as well as the discursive – and, as we argue in the conclusion, institutional – landscape that envelops this support. Speaking in the Commons Chamber in 2015, for example, Mr Eric Pickles, the communities secretary in charge of the TFP, described the need

for and the 'success' of the programme. He begins by conjuring up an image of inherited cultural poverty that we have critiqued earlier, and uses it to paint a picture of the need for the TFP:

> How many of us know families in our constituencies who have been failed by services but have at the same time placed a huge and disproportionate burden on those services through successive generations? Young men follow in their fathers' footsteps into trouble; young women fall victim to abusive relationships; and families push through the revolving doors of hard-pressed services with recurring problems of addiction, violence and mental and physical ill-health. I believed that there was a better way for those hard-pressed services to operate and through the troubled families programme we have found it. (HC Deb 2015: c157)

Having set up cultural poverty as the central issue for 'troubled families', Pickles' rhetoric then mobilises an infantilising and paternalistic frame:

> Families in the programme have signed up to a plan that gets to the root cause of their problems and makes a real difference to their lives. It involves tough love and practical help from people who take a no-nonsense, persistent approach, who will not go away and will not give up, and who will not be put off by missed appointments or unanswered doors. (HC Deb 2015: c157)

As should be clear by now, Pickles is completely avoiding the language of poverty and material inequality, framing the issue instead as the intergenerational cultural transmission of 'bad' behavior. What is needed, he suggests, is the paternalistic state intervention of 'tough love' – replacing 'absent' and 'troubled' fathers with the paternal state's supposed care and support (cf. De Benedictis 2012).[3]

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[3] While here we have focused specifically on comments made by Eric Pickles, similar rhetorical moves have been made by various others - see for instance Labour MP Fiona O'Donnell (HC Deb 2014: cols 341WH-342WH) and then Prime Minister David Cameron (HC Deb 2011: c1054).

In this rhetorical framing, then, infantilised parents *require* the state, and the state justifies its own authority as the arbiter of good and bad family behaviour. As Ruth Levitas argues, '"troubled families" discursively collapses "families with troubles" and "troublesome families", while simultaneously implying that they are dysfunctional as families. This discursive strategy is successful in feeding vindictive attitudes to the poor' (2012: 5). The language of troubled, troubling, and troublesome, we argue, relies on positioning these families as child-like, as infantile subjects whose unchecked libidinal desires are the cause of their poverty. Locating these families within the frame of childhood thus legitimates both a cultural blame and a paternalistic state. It also enables a complete bypassing of the material poverty faced by a significant proportion of TFP participants: an estimated 'two-thirds (66%) [of programme participants] had a net household income below £12,500 a year' (MCHLG 2019: 17). Thus, while work coaching or the support of a keyworker to 'increase resilience' may be useful interventions, they are not, we argue, the most appropriate or successful strategies to 'turn around' families whose main issue is, in fact, poverty.

Troubled Adults, Criminal Children

The argument that there is something culturally distinct about poor and disadvantaged populations, whose deprivation is the result of their allegedly lacking the norms and cultural resources to see the value in work, has been linked to the long-standing 'underclass' discourse that frames poverty as intrinsically linked to dysfunctional and criminal cultures (Pemberton et al. 2016; Shildrick et al. 2016). With this analysis in mind, the third and final discursive shift we discuss in this chapter is that of the convergence of poverty and criminalising discourses in recent policy agendas (Bond-Taylor 2014), including but not exclusive to the Troubled Families Programme.

The original figure, cited earlier, of 120,000 'troubled families', was based on research conducted by the Social Exclusion Task Force (SETF). This research suggested that more policy attention should be focused on 'the complex needs of a small minority of families who face multiple and entrenched problems' (SETF 2007: 4; cf. Levitas 2012). However, while there is some overlap in the indicators identified in the original research and the ones chosen as key criteria for the TFP, two key differences should be highlighted. Firstly, poverty (represented in the SETF research by a relative income measure) was one of the key

indicators included in the original research, but not in the TFP. Secondly, crime or anti-social behaviour was not included in the original research, but was in the TFP. Thus, that there is a correlation between being poor or disadvantaged and causing crime was not amongst the original findings – and in fact, only ten per cent of the children in multiply disadvantaged families had had any contact with the police at all (Levitas 2012: 10).

Nonetheless, 'crime and anti-social behaviour' became one of the 'headline problems' of the TFP (MCHLG 2019: 8), and in 2014 the DCLG argued explicitly that 'troubled families are families who both have problems and often cause problems – where children are truanting or excluded, where there is youth crime or anti-social behaviour and where parents are not working' (2014: 7). That one of the key catalysts for the programme was the 2011 England 'riots' also suggests that the criminalisation of poor and multiply disadvantaged families and children was at the centre of the programme from the very beginning. In his speech following the 'riots' in August 2011, then Prime Minister David Cameron stated 'we need more urgent action, too, on the families that some people call "problem", others call "troubled"' (2011a). Naming the 'riots' as a 'wake-up call' (2011b), Cameron announced the TFP shortly after, in December 2011. Apart from, as previously discussed, raising questions about the original figure of 120,000 'troubled families' and the selection of participants, these moves also suggest a convergence between poverty and criminality in both policy discourse and measures. Overall, then, the discursive framing of the TFP makes a series of discursive jumps from poverty, via cultural dysfunction, to criminality.

In 2018 the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) announced 'a new £5 million fund to address [the issue of youth crime] through the existing Troubled Families Programme' (MHCLG 2018b: 4), specifying that bids 'that will support families to build resilience and confidence in recognising and resisting the dangers of crime and violence and to make positive choices' (MHCLG 2018b: 5) would be supported. This suggests that a further convergence between policy agendas addressing poverty and disadvantage on the one hand, and criminality on the other, is taking place. Further, the fund was specifically seeking proposals that aim to 'develop resilience', 'raise awareness', and increase understanding of 'the dangers and risks surrounding gang crime' (MHCLG 2018b: 8) – rather than, again, addressing the material conditions in which disadvantaged children grow

up – indicating a further individualisation and culturalisation of the discourses surrounding poverty and disadvantage, as well as, in this case, youth crime.

What we are identifying here, then, is that the Government's attempts to obfuscate their own responsibility for economic inequality functioned not only through an infantilising discourse of poor parents, but also through placing poor children into a tenuous relationship to childhood. Across the discursive landscape of these policy shifts, there is a tacit refusal to speak about poor children *as children*. The qualifiers used – 'truanting', 'anti-social', 'cautioned and convicted' (MHCLG 2018a) – work to remove the normative contours of innocence and purity from these children. Doing so avoids, at all costs, naming the issue as the poverty that children experience (a framing of the child as victim or object *of* the violence of poverty) and instead blames the child as an *agent* of their own misfortune. This is not a new manoeuvre: childhood has historically been a privileged subject space, one whose limited confines work to render marginalised populations less deserving. The normative frame of childhood that renders its subjects innocent and deserving of support is, thus, actively being worked against within the language of the TFP, as it relates to poor children.

This framing, however, is ambivalent. The TFP both relies on the sympathy that normative childhood evokes in order to render these policies – which it claims are 'helping' poor and disadvantaged children – as justifiably intervening in the 'bad behaviour' of poor families. But, at the same time, it uses criminality, deviance, and adult-like agency as frames for discussing poor children themselves, removing them from the very frame of childhood that has just been mobilised to blame and stigmatise their parents. Consider the following contrast in discursive framings of childhood. At the start of his discussion of the TFP in the Commons Chambers, Pickles congratulates poor families for 'grasp[ing] the opportunity that this programme has offered to them to end a dysfunctional and negative way of life and offer their children a better future' (HC Deb 2015: c157). Here, childhood as futurity is mobilised to justify the TFP's framing of individual and familial responsibility for economic disparity. Childhood, in this frame, is cast through the lens of what Lee Edelman designates as 'the Child': 'the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention' (2004: 3). And yet, the stigmatising and hostile rhetoric of the TFP's individualising blame is palpable and indicative of a wider disdain of poor and

disadvantaged children themselves. Qualifying the success of the programme, Pickles, in the same session, makes an extraordinary claim:

> We need to be absolutely clear that we are almost certainly not turning out model citizens. … Turning [children's] lives around mean[s]: drastically reducing the antisocial behaviour and crime for which they were responsible; [and] ensuring that truanting children were back attending school. (HC Deb 2015: c162)

While childhood as futurity is being mobilised, then, to bolster the claim of the TFP's successes, the actual children who are supposedly being supported by this very programme are clearly not understood to have a hold on this futurity. Their location within childhood, within innocence and 'a better future', is discursively cast as tenuous at best. Growing up under the UK's regime of austerity, a regime that criminalises and stigmatises the conditions of poverty that austerity itself reproduces and entrenches, means, in other words, growing up with a partial hold on childhood.

Conclusion

What might be required, then, to ensure that poor children and their families could have a tangible hold on 'a better future'? While we are remiss to suggest a particular policy agenda that speaks on behalf of poor children, we want to conclude by suggesting that our method of using childhood as a frame of analysis might be useful in revealing the broader discursive manoeuvres that have enabled a governmental shirking of responsibility in addressing child poverty. Our discussion in this chapter has focused on the discursive framings that position poor children and poor parents as not-quite-children and child-like, respectively, but it is not just the poor families themselves who incur these rhetorical positionings. Tellingly, and importantly, Local Authorities have also been positioned in a paternalistic relationship vis-a-vis the government through the TFP. Here, we conclude by interrogating this framing and discussing briefly what it suggests about the decimation of universal care and services more generally.

The TFP's funding structure has, until recently, operated entirely on a 'payment by results' basis, requiring Local Authorities to achieve success in 'turning around' troubled

families before receiving any central government funding. This funding model, as well as the new model discussed later that has partially supplanted it, must be understood within the wider political economy of austerity and the associated cuts to universally accessible state support and services. The austerity period has seen Local Authority funding cut considerably, with significant consequences for councils' ability to offer both statutory and discretionary services (Morse 2014). Martin Smith and Rhonda Jones (2015), for example, document average cuts of 10.4% per Local Authority between 2010 and 2012, with some of the most deprived areas facing cuts of up to 25% by 2016. At the same time, the last ten years have also seen a gradual shift whereby the responsibility for service provision has increasingly been placed at the doorsteps of various public and private bodies, including Local Authorities, instead of the central government. The TFP funding model – which places the onus of ending 'worklessness' and tackling child poverty on Local Authorities – is thus indicative of the wider move away from universally accessible, state-provided, funding and services, and towards a model whereby Local Authorities are increasingly seen as akin to private sector enterprises, competing for central government funding that, when gained, comes attached to significant conditions as to how the money can be spent.

This context also places the Local Authority actions to match the estimated numbers of 'troubled families' in their area, discussed earlier, in a starkly different light, particularly given the significant financial benefits attached to 'turning around' the highest possible number of families. To be clear, then, our argument here is not that Local Authorities are to blame for the TFP's shortcomings. On the contrary, we are suggesting that blaming Local Authorities is part and parcel of the government's decentralising and obfuscating of its own responsibility for universal service provision. As a tactic, this blaming demands that individuals – here: Local Authorities – somehow compensate for the structural issues that they are mired in.

This becomes all the more clear in relation to the more recent shift in the TFP's funding structure, which has moved from operating solely through a 'payment by results' model (discussed previously) to what has been called an 'earned autonomy' model (MHCLG 2018a). Following a review of the original funding structure in 2017, the new model was introduced to allow particular Local Authorities to access investment upfront for specific projects. This framing of 'earned autonomy', particularly in contrast to the decimation of

Local Authority funding that has occurred concurrently to the discursive and policy shifts discussed in this chapter, all too clearly demarcates Local Authorities as child-like (dis)obedient citizens whose 'earned' capacity for agency and selfhood is dependent on 'good behaviour', as defined by the paternal government.

This recent move indicates two final points. First, it suggests that deployments of the frame of childhood are not limited to young people, nor individuals. Local Authorities, akin to the parents they are desperately seeking to care for, are designated child-like as well, in as much as this designation places them in a relation of dependency to the paternalistic government. This relation of dependency, we have argued, seeks to reify the government's position of power in the face of its abandoning of its role in caring for those who face circumstances of poverty and disadvantage. Second, the expansion of the frame of childhood to Local Authorities as a means of furthering the government's refusal to take ownership of the effects of austerity suggests that, while the support made possible by an expanded TFP might be beneficial for some, we cannot envision a 'successful' version of this programme within the current political context.

In recognising that both families and Local Authorities are positioned in such a way, it becomes clear that the discursive shifts we have discussed in this chapter are telling of the broader, systemic decimation of state-provided universal support services over the last ten years. And yet, in acknowledging this, we are not suggesting that all hope is lost. On the contrary, while we cannot feign to predict what the next few years will look like in the UK (as we write this conclusion, the UK is preparing for yet another general election after three years of seeking to negotiate a withdrawal from the EU), we are suggesting that the frame of analysis we have offered here might support the articulation of critical future engagements with the state. Using childhood as a frame, we have argued, means becoming aware of the ways in which individuals and populations are being insidiously positioned across scales in relationship to power. It is a form of analysis that exposes the multiple layers of political will that are invested in denying governmental accountability for the circumstances that poor children face growing up under austerity. Our hope is that in directing scholars' attention to this frame we might collectively be enabled to push back against future moments in which governments again seek to shirk their responsibilities, leaving poor families and children in the wake.

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