



Beatrice Webb: her quest for a fairer society

A hundred years of the
Minority Report

By Michael Ward



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Webb Memorial Trust

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Acknowledgments

As a Birkbeck graduate (like Sidney Webb), I was grateful, as ever, to be able to use the Birkbeck library while researching this publication. I would like to thank the archivists at that other great Webb institution, the LSE, for enabling me to consult the Passfield papers and the papers of the Fabian Society and the National Campaign for the Prevention of Destitution.

Pat Thane kindly agreed to read a draft of the paper, and made a number of detailed comments and helpful suggestions, as did the Webb Memorial Trustees. David Walker read a draft, and we discussed the key issues and themes. Sean Creighton encouraged me to be fair to John Burns. And Hilary Knight also commented in detail on the paper with great enthusiasm and support.

The Smith Institute now occupies a suite of offices in Somerset House, the former home of the Poor Law Commission. I would like to thank their own Three Bashaws: Paul Hackett, Paul Hunter and Nikki Langley-Essen for their constant help, enthusiasm and encouragement.

The Smith Institute and I would especially like to thank the Webb Memorial Trust for supporting the publication.

The original of the chalk drawing of Beatrice Webb on the front cover was donated by John Parker, on behalf of the Webb Trustees, to the National Portrait Gallery, in 1987. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the Gallery.

I: A landmark in English social thought

Twentieth-century Britain saw two great periods of social reform, in the decades 1905–14 and 1940–50, when intellectual and political leadership came together to achieve major change, shifting the agenda for social policy from the *relief* of poverty to the *prevention* of poverty. Before the First World War the policy lead came from Beatrice and Sidney Webb; in the 1940s, from William Beveridge, backed up by the economics of Maynard Keynes. In the heyday of Edwardian Liberalism, the extraordinary combination of David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill drove forward one reform after another, including old age pensions, controls on sweated labour, labour exchanges, and the start of insurance against unemployment and sickness; in the 1940s, governments led first by Churchill and subsequently by Clement Attlee introduced family allowances, universal secondary education, social security and the National Health Service, and finally in 1948 abolished what remained of the Poor Law.

Beatrice Webb died in 1943, Sidney in 1947. Their influence over the two phases of reform was lasting and decisive.

Even when the Labour government was defeated in 1951, the incoming Conservative prime minister was the 77-year-old Winston Churchill, the old social reformer. In the words of Peter Hennessy, "In the late 1940s and early 1950s, leading figures of both major political parties competed to be seen as the progenitors of the 'classic welfare state.'" Not until the Thatcher governments of the 1980s was there a sustained attempt to undo the legacy of social reform; with hindsight, what is surprising is not how much was taken away, but how much remained.

The 1909 *Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws*² has long been seen as a key influence on the emergence of Britain's welfare state. Beatrice Webb, a member of the commission, led the Minority faction; she and Sidney drafted the Minority Report; and three other members signed it. Before the Minority Report came Seebohm Rowntree's work on poverty in York, which in turn was preceded by the late Victorian body of empirical research into poverty, epitomised by the work of Charles Booth (himself married to Beatrice Webb's cousin, and a member of the 1905–09 Royal Commission).

A generation later, the successor to the Minority Report was Beveridge's *Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services* in 1942.³ Beveridge was close to the Webbs until their deaths, but was never a Fabian; unlike them, he saw insurance as central to reform, and always stressed voluntary action. Indeed, as well as their influence on

the welfare state, the Webbs had influenced Beveridge's career: in 1908, Beatrice told Winston Churchill: "If you are going to deal with unemployment, you must have the boy Beveridge."⁴ Beatrice hosted a meeting over lunch, and Beveridge was appointed to set up the network of labour exchanges. Beveridge's 1942 plan for social security depended on the new understanding, derived above all from the work of Keynes, that governments, through their management of the economy, could minimise unemployment.

GDH Cole wrote that the Minority Report "is indeed a landmark: it is the first full working out of the conception and policy of the welfare state, more comprehensive, because covering a wider ground, than the Beveridge Report of 1942, which in many ways reproduces its ideas."⁵ And Bob Holman, in his biography of George Lansbury, one of the other signatories of the Minority Report, argues that the Minority Report "became a corner stone of the future welfare state."⁶

Both Minority and Majority Reports were widely disseminated. The two volumes of the Majority Report run to over 900 pages; the Minority Report adds a further 716. The government printed 10,000 copies of the full document; the Fabian Society produced an additional 3,000 cut-price copies of the Minority Report on its own (though only after Sidney Webb had fought off a Treasury attempt to assert Crown copyright); and a commercial publisher produced another 1,500.

The publication of the Minority Report also marked the transformation of the Webbs from salon politicians, breakfasting and dining with Liberal Cabinet ministers and leading Conservatives alike, to public campaigners.

But, in the short and medium term at least, the campaign was unsuccessful. In the years before the First World War there was no legislation to implement the proposals of Majority or Minority. Plenty of other things were happening – the struggle between Lords and Commons over the Budget, a succession of major labour disputes, and the culmination of long campaigns over home rule for Ireland and women's suffrage. After the second general election of 1910, the Liberal government was more dependent than previously on Labour votes for its parliamentary majority. While there was no Poor Law Bill, there was legislation – supported overwhelmingly by the Labour MPs and the TUC, but opposed by Beatrice Webb – to introduce compulsory national insurance, initially for limited groups within the workforce, against sickness and unemployment. Poor Law legislation had to wait until 1929 for the abolition of the Board of Guardians", and until 1948 for the declaration in the great National Assistance Act that "the existing Poor Law shall cease to have effect". As Royden Harrison has written: "The proposals

of the minority report of the commission, drafted by the Webbs, may have been a landmark in English social thought, but for the time being their recommendations were dismissed or ignored."⁷

Although the Minority Report continues to be acknowledged as a landmark, its details are not familiar to modern audiences. A hundred years later, some of the dilemmas and ambiguities that faced the Webbs and the Edwardian Liberal government remain real: in the 2011 Budget, the Conservative /Liberal Coalition announced that it planned to consult on the proposed merger of national insurance and income tax – but that it remained committed to the contributory principle.

II: What is the welfare state?

The Minority Report, then, certainly prefigures the welfare state, although the Webbs did not themselves employ that expression. But there is no simple, single definition of what the welfare state is. What we refer to as the welfare state is an assortment of different policies, adopted at different times for different reasons and under different imperatives. The unifying concept is that, to a greater or lesser extent, the welfare of the citizen is the responsibility of the state, with a particular focus on the relief, and if possible the prevention, of poverty.

In a famous passage, Beveridge (who, like the Webbs, himself disliked the phrase "welfare state"), wrote that "organisation of social insurance should be treated as one part only of a comprehensive policy of social progress. Social Insurance fully developed may provide income security; it is an attack upon Want. But Want is one only of five giants on the road of reconstruction and in some ways the easiest to attack. The others are Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness." He went on to say that "social security must be achieved by co-operation between the State and the individual. The State should offer security for service and contribution."⁸

In the following paragraphs, nine distinct strands that together contribute to the welfare state are identified; others might suggest different, or additional, policy areas. For each of the nine strands an attempt is made to outline their antecedents: in the Minority Report and the work of the Webbs, in the Beveridge Report, or in the Poor Law tradition itself.

First, at the heart of the welfare state lies the commitment to full employment, set out at the beginning of the 1944 employment policy white paper, issued by the wartime coalition: "The Government accept as one of their primary aims and responsibilities the maintenance of a high and stable level of employment after the war."⁹ When the white paper was being drafted, Keynes was working in the Treasury, and commented on early versions; after publication, he wrote: "My own feeling is that the first sentence is more valuable than the whole of the rest."¹⁰ The state would use the management of overall demand in the economy as an instrument to sustain employment, and would support this by other policies as well – on the location of industry, training and labour mobility. Beveridge's recommendations were premised on full employment; without full employment they would not be viable. As Lloyd George's biographer wrote, "during the Second World War, the mature Beveridge sought to reinstate insurance in his famous Report, but only on the assumption that 'full' employment was maintained."¹¹

Although the Webbs had known Keynes in the pre-1914 years, his main economic work then lay in the future. The 1909 Minority Report clearly aspires to the same aims as the 1944 white paper – but in less resonant and assertive language: the first of the recommendations on the destitution of the able-bodied reads: “That the duty of so organising the National Labour Market as to prevent or minimise Unemployment should be placed upon a Minister responsible to parliament, who might be designated the Minister for Labour.”¹² When Beatrice Webb died, Keynes described her as “the greatest woman of the generation that is now passing”.¹³

A second core element of the welfare state is the set of contributory or insurance-based benefits – the old age pension, sickness benefit, and unemployment benefit, known at different times by various names. (Although the original old age pension introduced in 1908 was non-contributory and funded out of taxation, subsequent legislation in 1925 brought the pension into the insurance system.) Their British origins can be traced to the Liberal government of 1905, and their scope was expanded dramatically by the post-Beveridge legislation of the 1945 Labour government. In turn, the British advocates of social insurance were inspired by the experience of similar programmes in Germany. A succession of delegations went to visit Germany, initially to look at labour exchanges, and then to look at social insurance as well. Beveridge, Churchill, Lloyd George and the TUC all made the pilgrimage – Beveridge, on his first visit, armed with letters of introduction from Sidney Webb, among others, found everywhere that “the name of Sidney Webb is quite a charm”.¹⁴ The Webbs, however, though enthusiastic about labour exchanges, were sceptical about insurance: Beatrice, at least, actively opposed the National Insurance Bill of 1911, preferring in the Minority Report to encourage the older tradition of trade union-based insurance.

The third core element of the welfare state is the provision of universal, non-contributory benefits, of which the main example is the family allowance or child benefit – a Beveridge proposal, though never paid at the level Beveridge had envisaged. Again, this was foreshadowed in the Minority Report, in a more restricted form and including the condition that women in receipt of these payments should not also go out to work: “all mothers having the charge of young children, and in receipt, by themselves or their husbands, of any form of Public Assistance, should receive enough for the full maintenance of the family; and that it should then be made a condition of such assistance that the mother should devote herself to the care of her children, without seeking industrial employment”.¹⁵

Fourth, there has always remained an element of non-contributory, discretionary, means-tested benefits – successor to “outdoor relief” (that is, payments to poor people living

outside the workhouse) under the Poor Law. The Webbs aimed at the abolition of the Poor Law; Beveridge, while believing that most needs would be met through social insurance, saw at least a temporary, residual role for direct assistance. For example: "In the transitional period before contributory pensions reach subsistence level, assistance pensions will be required in a considerable number of cases."¹⁶ Speaking in the debates on the National Assistance Bill, Tom Steele, a junior minister in the Attlee government, said: "I think it would be inappropriate to wish the National Assistance Board an active future. Our hope is that the extensions of insurance, and eventually a rising level of prosperity for all, will in the long run leave it with little to do."¹⁷ But these hopes were disappointed: a non-contributory top-up, paid for from national taxation, became a permanent feature. In the words of Howard Glennerster, "The comprehensive post-war social insurance schemes never eliminated poverty or major dependence on the old public assistance tradition."¹⁸

Partly, and especially at first, this was for financial reasons: the sums made available by Treasury and parliament were not sufficient to realise the Beveridge vision. Pensions were set at a level which meant that many pensioners needed national assistance (later supplementary benefit, later still income support) to achieve subsistence income; contributions were set too low to generate adequate pension levels. Through the 1950s and 1960s, without regular uprating, family allowance wasted away, and the poverty of the working poor re-emerged. Regional variations in housing costs were always a problem for a national scale of benefits. Even after Beveridge, social policy never eliminated discretion and means tests.

Fifth, certain services have been taken wholly or substantially out of the market: health and education – attacking disease and ignorance, two of Beveridge's five giants – although between 1911 and 1948 healthcare was provided on an insurance basis. The origins of a universal health service can be traced to the Minority Report, which concluded that the existing arrangements for separate services provided to the destitute by the Poor Law, and to others by local government, "overlapping, unco-ordinated with each other and sometimes actually conflicting with each other's work" could not be justified.¹⁹ The report recommended the creation of a "unified medical service". It argued that "in the public interest, neither the promptitude nor the efficiency of the medical treatment must in any way be limited by considerations of whether the patient can or should repay its cost."²⁰ The report went on to argue, however, that this did not exclude the possibility of patients being expected to repay some of the costs.

The Minority Report also recommended that the existing separate Poor Law schools should be merged into the mainstream local authority schools. By 1909 a publicly funded

system of elementary education already existed; Sidney Webb had been closely involved in education policy as a member of the London County Council. Universal secondary education was still in the future, although in 1902 Sidney had played a major role in persuading a Conservative government to extend state involvement in this sector.

Sixth, a number of goods and services are provided free to users. In the years after the Second World War, young children received free baby milk, orange juice and cod liver oil. The origins of free school meals go back before 1909: the Minority Report, in its critique of the Poor Law, concluded that, "as a consequence of the failure of the Destitution Authorities to prevent or to relieve child destitution, Parliament has been led, after many official investigations, to entrust to the Local Education Authorities the duty of providing meals for the children found at school unfed".²¹

Now, the provision of free services is particularly advanced for people over 60, who benefit from free prescriptions, free bus travel (and in London, free train and tube travel), and winter fuel payments.

Seventh, there is a broad range of care, residential and preventative services, for children, older people, people with disabilities, and people with learning difficulties. These have direct origins in the Poor Law, passing in 1929 to local government much in line with the recommendations of the Minority Report. The Seebohm Report, in 1968, which led to the creation of integrated local authority social services departments, commented: "At one time the general Poor Law dealt with orphaned and deprived children, the mentally ill and the mentally subnormal, as well as many of the elderly poor. It housed the homeless and offered a roof to the unmarried mother and her child. Different categories of need were gradually separated off from the Poor Law system but this process was not completed until 1948."²² It was central to the Minority Report that these services should each be linked to existing local authority provision, and this did happen. Although local government inherited the physical assets of the Poor Law system – the workhouses, which they euphemistically rebranded as "institutions" – many managed over time to replace them. The Seebohm reorganisation was succeeded by the 2006 reorganisation, which grouped education and services for children together in one set of council departments, and adult social care in another.

Adult social care is an uneasy and unsatisfactory legatee of the Poor Law, with provision spread across a mixture of public, private and voluntary sector organisations, under-resourced and subject to relentless demographic pressure. And there is no overall consensus on who – state or individual? – should pay for the necessary care, whether home-based or residential.

The eighth area is housing – part, but not part, of the welfare state. Council housing might have evolved into a tenure providing good-quality housing for a broad range, but instead, since the 1980s, has increasingly become a residual tenure for the poor. The 1960s poverty lobby concluded that services provided exclusively for poor people tended to become poor services: in different language, this was also, and earlier, a core conclusion of the Minority Report. The state over many years has subsidised the construction of social housing, through registered social landlords as well as local authorities; it continues to pay housing benefit to help people in and out of work with rent levels; and it gives local authorities a duty (itself another linear descendant of a Poor Law duty) to house the homeless.

Unlike many of the other strands considered here, the origins of social housing cannot be attributed to the Minority Report. But its beginnings can be traced to the same ferment of concern that produced the social inquiries of the late Victorian period and the reforms of the 1905 Liberal government. The Progressive London County Council, of which Sidney Webb was a prominent member, was among the first local authorities to build its own housing. It was Lloyd George as prime minister in 1918 who promised to build "homes for heroes". And the Attlee government, at the same time as legislating to implement Beveridge, and abolishing the Poor Law, launched a major housing drive.

Reviewing housing policy at the end of the 1960s, Crouch and Wolf wrote that "housing is only very partly regarded as a social service. Partly it is a private consumption good and partly (in some aspects of owner occupation) it is a form of mass property investment. Welfare aspects of the situation have been grafted on in an even more ad hoc and uncoordinated way than is usually the case with social policy."²³

Housing policy links directly to the ninth strand: the provision of means-tested benefits to the working poor, initially through family income supplement, latterly through family credit and tax credits, and through housing benefit. The antecedents of this approach lie neither in the Minority Report nor in Beveridge, but deep in Poor Law history. When Keith Joseph, responsible for welfare policy in the Heath government of the early 1970s, introduced family income supplement, he was accused of recreating the Speenhamland system of the late 18th century – paying outdoor relief to people who were in work, and thus enabling employers to drive wages down. This was the very approach that the Royal Commission of 1832–34, precursor to that of 1905–09, was charged with eliminating.

Nevertheless, while Beatrice Webb and Beveridge alike would have been shocked by the reappearance of in-work benefits, they would perhaps have understood the circumstances. Both reports had called for allowances to cover the cost of raising children. But family

allowances were never set at a level that covered the full costs involved – and their value was allowed to erode steadily in the 1950s and 1960s. Beveridge also highlighted the problem of wide variations in rent levels across the country – which he attributed to “failure to distribute industry and population ... and failure to provide housing according to need”, concluding “in this, as in other respects, the framing of a completely satisfactory plan of social security depends on a solution of other social problems.”²⁴

III: Pilgrim's Progress?

The British welfare state inherited by the Conservative/Liberal Coalition of 2010 therefore represented a patchwork quilt of policies crafted over the previous century. It was not a simple linear progression, starting with a blueprint drafted in 1909 and culminating in a consistent and intellectually coherent finished product.

Writing of the early 19th century, Edward Thompson criticised the "'Pilgrim's Progress' orthodoxy, in which the period is ransacked for forerunners – pioneers of the welfare state, progenitors of a socialist commonwealth, or (more recently) early exemplars of rational industrial relations". His quarrel with this approach was that "it reads history in the light of subsequent preoccupations, and not in fact as it occurred".²⁵ The Webbs certainly had a profound influence on the structures of the emerging and future welfare state, and themselves were far from reticent about the role they played. In the words of Jose Harris, the history of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws "has been both illuminated and distorted by the Webbs' account of the ideas that were put forward and the events that occurred".

The importance of the Minority Report is that it is a central source for the body of ideas that shaped and determined the welfare state. It provides insights; it asserts values and identifies key themes. It looks backwards as well as forwards. The young Beatrice Webb, embarking in the 1880s on her career as a social investigator, had first worked with the Charity Organisation Society (COS), which had been established by devout Anglicans in 1869 in order to discourage indiscriminate alms giving. By the time of the Royal Commission, Beatrice had identified the COS as the enemy: "In after years, when the latter-day leaders of [the] charity organization and I had become respectively propagandists of rival political and economic theories, we fought each other's views to the death."²⁶

But while Beatrice had parted from the COS, she retained a distinctly moralistic approach. The Minority Report recommends that no child should be employed below the age of 15, and that employment below the age of 18 should be part-time, with 30 hours of education. But it also recommends that women with young children should not seek work outside the home.

If Beatrice Webb, like Beveridge, had identified giants to overcome, her list would have included the principles of the New Poor Law of 1834, the focus on destitution alone, and the persistence of the general mixed workhouse. By the time of her death in 1943 those giants had been all but vanquished, with the process completed by the post-war Labour government.

Old age, sickness and unemployment are constants, as important now as in 1909. But the social context in which they occur has changed dramatically – partly as a result of social reforms. With proper healthcare and pensions, far more people survive into old age. Infant mortality has fallen, as has general morbidity. The labour market is different: both the Minority Report and Beveridge assumed a world dominated by male breadwinners. The old indicators of bad housing – overcrowding, lack of basic amenities – have largely been overcome, but the challenge of overcoming squalor, providing decent homes at affordable rents, remains. These changes mean that the welfare state of the 21st century has to address new issues as well as those that dominated debate in 1909.

Both Minority and Majority Reports ranged widely over questions of poverty and destitution. But they were in the end constrained by their terms of reference, which focused on the Poor Laws and on unemployment. The Minority Report, therefore, represents the Webbs' answers to those questions, rather than a full statement of their views at that time. Such a statement is given in Sidney's 1911 Fabian tract, *The Necessary Basis of Society*,²⁷ in which he spells out the proposal for a "national minimum" – not just a minimum wage, but a minimum for health, for sanitation, for child nurture, and for leisure and recreation.

IV: Debates and tensions

There is, then, no one blueprint: no route map to eliminate poverty once and for all. But a number of themes, dilemmas and tensions recur regularly throughout the 100 years since the Minority Report; even when an issue appears to be resolved, the same questions can emerge again after many years, prompted by budget pressures, social or economic change, or political circumstances.

Such issues include:

- whether services should be concentrated on those in greatest need;
- universal versus selective provision;
- entitlement versus discretion;
- contributory versus non-contributory benefits;
- central versus local responsibility; and
- what work incentives are necessary or appropriate.

A first issue, then, is the extent to which poverty policy should be concerned with all poor people, or just with the poorest: “those in greatest need”. Beatrice Webb’s focus in the Minority Report was on the Poor Law as the destitution authority. Her argument was that to provide services for the destitute alone separated them off from the rest of society – services for poor children should be integrated with services for all children, services for older poor people should be joined with all services for the elderly, and so on. The Webbs hoped that this would reduce what was later termed the “stigma” attached to services exclusively for the poor.

There are some parallels between the arguments for concentrating services on those in greatest need, and the second tension, that between universal and selective provision. The direction of the Minority Report is that there should be universal provision, and that is certainly the sense of Sidney Webb’s “national minimum”. But the Treasury, faced with the costs of universal services, has usually argued for selectivity. Thus family allowance and child benefit have always been vulnerable to attempts to reduce their scope – from the initial setting of a relatively low rate, to the failure to uprate, and the creation of a targeted, separate benefit stream (family income supplement and its successors) for parents in low-paid work. An important argument in favour of universal provision has always been the additional administrative cost of means tests and selectivity.

The National Health Service is the great survivor of a universal benefit-in-kind, but its

very survival, and the relatively open-ended Exchequer commitment that this implies, makes it hard to win the case for other extensions of universal provision.

A third distinction is between entitlement and discretion. The New Poor Law and its Elizabethan predecessor were harsh, judgmental and punitive. But the pauper who submitted to the workhouse test was entitled to his relief, limited though it was: it was not discretionary. The Charity Organisation Society did not like this aspect of the Poor Law – and neither did Beatrice Webb. One of her criticisms of Lloyd George's proposals for national insurance was that the benefits were to be paid as of right.

The choice between an insurance-based system, and one funded from general taxation, was resolved in the years before the First World War in favour of the insurance or contributory principle. Beveridge was the great, consistent protagonist of insurance, and his report and subsequent legislation tilted the balance further in that direction. High family allowances together with high levels of insurance-based benefits could conceivably have reduced the need for other benefits, but even Beveridge himself never thought that non-contributory benefits could be wholly eliminated.

Yet another tension is between local and central administration and taxation. The Poor Law was essentially part of local government. Parishes before 1834, and boards of guardians afterwards, raised a local rate to cover the costs of local relief and the local workhouse. This created an obvious problem: poor people tend to live in poor places; the costs of relieving that poverty were a charge on the same local community. By the late 19th century, then, the poor rate had come to be supplemented by grant in aid from central government, and in the 20th century rate equalisation schemes were introduced as well. Only after the abolition of the guardians in 1929, and the transfer of Poor Law services to mainstream local government, did some of the costs of outdoor relief move from local to national taxation. The break-up of the Poor law in practice led to a major transfer of the cost of relieving poverty from local to national budgets.

Finally there is the tension between providing relief adequate to need, and maintaining work incentives – a tension that has never been completely resolved, from the days of the New Poor Law to contemporary debates about welfare-to-work, sickness benefit and housing benefit.

V: The principles of 1834

Although the Poor Law was of venerable antiquity, tracing its origins back well before the Poor Law of 1601 (the "statute of the 43rd of Elizabeth"), the 1905-09 Royal Commission Majority faction decided that they did not need to push their own inquiries further back than 1832, because the appointment of the 1832-34 Royal Commission, and the actions that followed, "mark the beginning of a system of administration which has without serious break or sudden change continued down to this day".²⁸

This was the New Poor Law: recommended by the Royal Commission, enacted by the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, and implemented by the Poor Law commissioners – the central authority established by the act of parliament. The Poor Law commissioners were, in effect, what later generations might have called a quango. The commissioners were replaced in 1847 by the Poor Law Board, whose president was a minister, and this in turn gave way to the Local Government Board, again with a minister as its president, in 1871.

The Royal Commission of 1832-34 was set up primarily to regulate outdoor relief, and to put an end to the Speenhamland system. Among its extensive findings and recommendations, three principles were of critical importance:

- less eligibility;
- the workhouse test; and
- the central authority.

The most significant of these, which the later commissioners repeatedly referred to as the fundamental principle of the Poor Law Amendment Act, was that of less eligibility: the position of the poor person on relief "shall not be made really or apparently so eligible as the situation of the independent labourer of the lowest class".²⁹

The Majority Report of the 1905-09 Royal Commission quoted a witness at the previous inquiry as putting the matter "more succinctly": "To let the labourer find that the parish is the hardest taskmaster and the worst paymaster he can find, and thus induce him to make his application to the parish his last and not his first resource."³⁰ The 1834 report continued: "Every penny bestowed that tends to render the condition of the pauper more eligible than that of the independent labourer, is a bounty on indolence and vice."³¹

Second, the 1832-34 commissioners recommended that "all relief whatever to able bodied persons or to their families, otherwise than in well-regulated workhouses (i.e.,

places where they may be set to work according to the spirit and intention of the 43 Elizabeth) shall be declared unlawful and shall cease".³² There was to be no more outdoor relief for the able-bodied: if people were destitute, they could enter the workhouse and accept its disciplines.

Third, the 1834 report proposed a central board to control the administration of the Poor Laws, "and that the Commissioners be empowered and directed to frame and enforce regulations for the governance of workhouses, and as to the nature and amount of relief to be given and the labour to be exacted in them, and that such regulations shall, as far as may be practicable, be uniform throughout the country".³³ Specifically, the commissioners were to have the power to bring parishes together into "unions", and to provide new workhouses. An American commentator, writing in 1943, saw the 1834 report as "more than an ordinary document of state. It was a pronouncement, as it were, from Sinai. It established what was almost in the nature of a moral code."³⁴

The three commissioners, and their secretary, Edwin Chadwick, who had been a leading member of the Royal Commission, set about their task with enthusiasm. By 1837 it was estimated that only 10% of English parishes had not been provided with boards of guardians.

But the rule of the Royal Commission was hated. Campaigners against the New Poor Law reached for international images of tyranny to describe the regime: the new workhouses were called "new Bastilles", and the commissioners were known variously as the "three Bashaws (or three kings) of Somerset House", or the "pinch pauper triumvirate". The Hammonds described the climate after the 1834 act of parliament in this way: "between 1834 and 1837 every workman saw himself exposed to the danger of imprisonment in the Bastille, with the break-up of his family and home at the dictation of the Poor Law Commissioners. That is how the struggle appeared to the working-class mind. The Poor Law Commissioners stood for an alien power, inaccessible to pity or justice."³⁵ From 1836 to 1842, the commissioners prescribed a rule of silence for all meals in the workhouse. Husbands and wives were separated. Bells could not be tolled at pauper funerals. At Dewsbury, the guardians were minded to let an old man smoke a pipe – but were warned that they must seek the permission of the commissioners in Somerset House.

Edward Thompson wrote of the act of 1834 and the subsequent regime of the commissioners that it was "perhaps the most sustained attempt to impose an ideological dogma, in defiance of the evidence of human need, in English history".³⁶

Journalists and parliamentarians criticised and campaigned against the rule of the bashaws, and change came. A new act of parliament empowered the guardians to meet funeral expenses. The commissioners gave way to a system of parliamentary accountability. Outdoor relief never disappeared entirely, and continued to be important in industrial centres. And it would be wrong to characterise everything in the 1834 settlement as negative. The Minority Report had also proposed the abolition of the general mixed workhouse – in which families with children, sick or disabled people, and the elderly were housed indiscriminately side by side. This never happened: the persistence of the general mixed workhouse into the 20th century became a target for Beatrice Webb's invective.

Such were the principles of 1834; such was the system of administration that continued to 1905. As Beveridge's biographer states, "it was a cardinal principle of the 1834 Poor Law that genuine unemployment among able bodied workmen did not really exist".³⁷

VI: The origins of the Royal Commission of 1905–09

By the early years of the 20th century the long period of settled administration of the Poor Law ushered in by the commissioners was drawing to a close. Social issues were now perceived in different ways. Unemployment moved up the political agenda, and there was a widespread campaign for the introduction of old age pensions. And Poor Law practice was increasingly at variance with the letter and the spirit of 1834.

The appointment of the Royal Commission was one of the last acts of Arthur Balfour's Conservative government in 1905. Balfour himself announced the inquiry in August: "There has been no such inquiry, as far as I know, since the great inquiry in the thirties, which resulted in the passing into law of the New Poor Law Act; and we think the time has now come when a survey of the subject under new conditions, and in connection with modern requirements, should be undertaken."³⁸ The terms of reference, in addition to inquiring "into the working of the laws relating to the relief of poor persons in the United Kingdom", specifically also asked the commission to examine the means, outside the Poor Law, "for meeting distress arising from want of employment, particularly during periods of severe industrial depression".³⁹

The membership of the Royal Commission was announced in December. The chairman was a former Conservative Cabinet minister, Lord George Hamilton – described by Beatrice Webb as "an experienced politician and attractive *grand seigneur*".⁴⁰ Just before the announcement, Balfour came to lunch with the Webbs (before going on with them to see George Bernard Shaw's new play, *Major Barbara*). He told Beatrice that finding a chairman for the Royal Commission had not been easy, and added apologetically, "George Hamilton is not the fool he looks."⁴¹ Five commission members were Poor Law guardians – four of them, including George Lansbury, had been chairmen of their boards. The permanent secretary of the Local Government Board, Sir Samuel Provis, was a member, together with his equivalents for Scotland and Wales, and the senior medical inspector for the Poor Law. There were six leading members of the Charity Organisation Society, or COS (whose somewhat menacing full name was the Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity). Gareth Stedman Jones has described the aim of the COS as "to impose on the life of the poor a system of sanctions and rewards which would convince them that there could be no escape from life's miseries except by thrift, regularity and hard work".⁴² One of the founders of the COS, Henrietta Barnett, wrote that the society's aim was "decreasing, not suffering, but sin".⁴³ In Beatrice Webb's view, the six COS members on the Royal Commission all "began the enquiry as convinced adherents of the principles of 1834".⁴⁴ There were also three representatives of the Church of England, one of the Catholic Church in Ireland, and

a trade unionist – Francis Chandler, general secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters.

Beatrice Webb was in no doubt as to the purpose of the Royal Commission. On 2 December 1905, shortly after her appointment, she went to meet JS Davy, the assistant secretary of the Local Government Board – whom she later described as “an energetic man ... intent on reaction”.⁴⁵ In her diary, Beatrice spelled out the conclusions she drew about the intentions of the Local Government Board officials: they would propose structural changes, including the abolition of the boards of guardians, with which she was inclined to agree. “But we were also to recommend reversion to the principles of 1834 as regards policy; to stem the tide of philanthropic impulse that was sweeping away the old embankment of deterrent tests to the receipt of relief.”⁴⁶

Davy – head of the Poor Law division at the Local Government Board, and the author of an official inquiry report into allegations of extravagance by the Poplar Board of Guardians (whose chairman was George Lansbury) – certainly endorsed the principles of 1834 himself. A man, he said, “must stand by his accidents: he must suffer for the general good of the body politic ... every obstacle should be put in the way of a man settling down into the status of a pauper”.⁴⁷

VII: The 1905 Liberal government

Beatrice Webb's meeting with JS Davy took place on Monday 2 December 1905; the royal warrant confirming the appointment of the commission – including “[o]ur trusty and well-beloved ... Beatrice, wife of Sidney Webb, Bachelor of Laws” – was dated Wednesday 4 December. Arthur Balfour and his government resigned the same day, and the Liberals, led by Henry Campbell-Bannerman, accepted office the following day. A general election in January 1906 gave the Liberals a majority of 84 over all other parties; 53 Labour MPs were elected.

The sponsor department for the Poor Law Commission was the Local Government Board, successor in title to the Poor Law Board, and before that the Poor Law Commission. In the outgoing government, the president of the Local Government Board had been Gerald Balfour, younger brother of the aristocratic prime minister; in the new government, the post went to John Burns, the working-class Lib-Lab MP for Battersea and the first working man to join the Cabinet, legendary in the 1880s as the “man with the red flag”.

Both the old minister and the new were well known to the Webbs. Gerald Balfour had been a member of an earlier Royal Commission, on labour, in the 1890s, and Sidney had appeared before him as a witness; Beatrice described the encounter: “It ended in an amicable discussion between him and Gerald Balfour for an hour and a half, on abstract economics, pleasant to listen to, but fit only for after-dinner talk.”⁴⁸ By the time of the Poor Law Commission, the Balfours were part of the Webbs' social network. Beatrice's diary for 22 March 1907 tells of a “brilliant little luncheon, typical of the ‘Webb’ set. Dr. Nansen (now Norwegian minister), Gerald and Lady Betty Balfour, the Bernard Shaws, Bertrand Russells, Masterman and Lady Desborough, typical in its mixture of opinions, classes, interests – all as jolly as jolly could be – a rapid rush of talk.”⁴⁹

Burns they had known even longer: he had served with Sidney Webb on the London County Council, and his achievements in building the New Unionism of the 1880s were written up in their *History of Trades Unionism*.⁵⁰ Beatrice used his papers as a research source. But their encounters with Burns were not as jolly as those with the patrician Balfour. In 1893 Beatrice wrote that “our relationship with John Burns has never been a cordial one” – although she hoped it would improve. She thought that “jealousy and suspicion of rather a mean kind are John Burns' burning sin. A man of splendid physique, fine and strong intelligence, human sympathy, practical capacity, he is unfitted for a really great position by his utter inability to be a constant and loyal comrade. He stands absolutely alone.”⁵¹

Two ministers in the Liberal government, David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, led the government's social reforms. Both became ministers for the first time in 1905 – Lloyd George was appointed president of the Board of Trade, Churchill under-secretary for the colonies; both were promoted when, after Campbell-Bannerman's death, Herbert Asquith became prime minister in 1908 – Lloyd George becoming Chancellor of the Exchequer, Churchill president of the Board of Trade.

Before 1905, the Webbs had maintained as strong links with the opposition Liberals as with the governing Conservatives. But their links were with the Liberal imperialists, or Limps – the former prime minister Lord Rosebery, Richard Haldane and Asquith. Lloyd George and Burns were from the pro-Boer faction, which had opposed the Conservatives' South African war. "The key posts, so far as the Webb interest in social reform was concerned, had gone to anti-imperialists such as Lloyd George and other Radicals over whom they had no influence."⁵² The war had also split the Fabian Society, with a number of leading members (including Ramsay MacDonald) resigning from the society when, in a ballot, they failed to come out against the war.

The differences between the two groups in the Liberal Party were social as well as political: the Limps were part of the metropolitan network in which the Webbs moved. Beatrice confided to her diary on 28 February 1901, "We are at present very thick with the 'Limps'. Asquith, Haldane, Edward Grey, Mungo Ferguson and the [Jack] Tennants form a little family group into which they have temporarily attracted Sidney by asking him to their little dinners and informal meetings." The Limps, also, "had no prejudice against our views of social reform."⁵³

Relations with the pro-Boers were less cordial: "Moreover, the other school of Liberalism are extremely distasteful to us: we disagree with them on almost every point of home and foreign policy."⁵⁴ David Lloyd George was a key figure: a solicitor from rural Wales, brought up by his uncle, a radical village shoemaker, and distant (at this stage in his career) from the elite world of the Webbs, the Balfours and the Asquiths. In July 1901, Beatrice wrote: "the Imperialist section – Haldane, Asquith, Grey – had been working at the Bar, enjoying themselves in London 'society' and letting things slide. Suddenly, they woke up to find the Liberal Party in the House of Commons under the leadership of Lloyd George, declaring itself definitely against the war ..."⁵⁵ But Lloyd George was in the Cabinet from 1905, and Chancellor from 1908. The editors of Beatrice's *Our Partnership* write: "The Webbs, in the days of the Asquith Government, did not get on with Lloyd George, whom they regarded as an obstinate Nonconformist."⁵⁶

As Chancellor, Lloyd George inherited from Asquith the proposal to introduce the first

old age pensions. In 1906, Asquith had asked the Treasury to work up a proposal for pensions, keeping responsibility well away from the Local Government Board,⁵⁷ because of the importance of dissociating pensions from the Poor Law. Lloyd George was subsequently responsible for the introduction of national Insurance.

The other leading figure in the Liberal social reforms came from neither of the Liberal factions, having recently defected from the Conservatives over the issue of free trade. Beatrice Webb had met him while he was still a Conservative; on 8 July 1903, she wrote: "Went into dinner with Winston Churchill. First impressions: restless – almost intolerably so, without capacity for sustained and unexciting labour – egotistical, bumptious, shallow minded and reactionary, but with a certain personal magnetism, great pluck and some originality – not of intellect but of character."⁵⁸

By the time he emerged as a member of the Liberal government, Churchill had developed a strong interest in social and labour market policy. He wrote in 1906: "I am of the opinion that the State should increasingly assume the position of the reserve employer of labour."⁵⁹ He worked closely with CFG Masterman, a London-based Liberal MP with an interest in social reform; Masterman wrote in a letter shortly before Churchill went to the Board of Trade: "He is full of the poor whom he has just discovered. He thinks he is called by providence – to do something for them."⁶⁰ At the same time Churchill wrote to Asquith: "Dimly, across gulfs of ignorance, I see the outline of a policy I call the Minimum Standard."⁶¹

Although Churchill had met the Webbs, he was not working with them before he became a minister; in 1908, there was discussion of the possibility of his going to the Local Government Board rather than the Board of Trade, when he is said to have exclaimed: "I refuse to be shut up in a soup kitchen with Mrs Sidney Webb."⁶² On his first day at the Board of Trade, he requested a briefing on labour exchanges; his first legislation was to introduce trade boards to regulate wages in sweated industries, and he later carried through the introduction of labour exchanges before moving to become home secretary in 1911. Beatrice's opinion of him varied over time, but at the time he went to the Board of Trade she wrote that he had "the American's capacity for the quick appreciation and rapid execution of new ideas, whilst hardly comprehending the philosophy beneath them."⁶³

For a short period in the 1900s, the Board of Trade became, in the words of Beveridge's biographer, "the spearhead of innovation in government social policy."⁶⁴ This was not just because of the energy, initiative and ambition of Lloyd George and Churchill as successive presidents, but also because its role had expanded in the previous 10 years,

starting with the establishment of the commercial, labour and statistical department in 1894: the board now had a role in social investigation, labour relations and industrial arbitration.

VIII: Minority and Majority

In *Our Partnership*, published posthumously in 1948, Beatrice Webb left a detailed account of the proceedings of the Royal Commission. But, as Jose Harris has commented, "the history of this Royal Commission has been both illuminated and distorted by the Webbs' account of the ideas that were put forward and the events that occurred".⁶⁵

What is clear is that Beatrice did not come to the commission with a ready-made set of proposals: the body of ideas and policies that emerged as the Minority Report took shape gradually. She did, however, start from a conviction, following her meeting with JS Davy, that the officials, and the COS representatives, wanted to revert to the principles of 1834. At the first meeting of the commission she secured the defeat of the work programme that had been prepared. She was aware of the effect that her antagonistic and assertive behaviour might have: "It will need all my self-command to keep myself from developing a foolish hostility ...".⁶⁶

By the summer of 1906, Beatrice was launching her own research programme, undertaken by her own researchers, and funded by George Bernard Shaw's wife, Charlotte: "... despairing of any action on the part of the Commission, I have undertaken, unknown to them, an investigation into administration of boards of guardians. I shall put Mrs Spencer to analyse the documents that are pouring in to me by every post, and Miss Bulkeley shall go through minutes."⁶⁷

The early summer of 1907 found Beatrice circulating early drafts of her own ideas – initially to other members of the commission, and soon more widely as well: "What I have to aim at is to draw up a rattling good report, vivid in statement of fact, and closely reasoned with a logical conclusion and immediately practicable proposals of a moderate character."⁶⁸ In November of that year, a full draft of Beatrice's proposals, now with the title *The Break up of the Poor Law*, was circulated, and she and Sidney were working on their proposals for the unemployed, which eventually became Part II of the Minority Report. In May 1908, Beatrice sent copies of her proposals to leading ministers and members of the opposition – including Asquith, Lloyd George, Churchill, and the Balfour brothers. As part of her media campaign, Beatrice also gave the proposals to *The Times*, which printed them in August 1908: "This really indiscreet use of our composition roused Lord George Hamilton to fury, and he fired off angry letters denouncing a breach of confidence."⁶⁹ This represented the final breach between Minority and Majority. But by this time it was generally known that a Minority Report was being drafted. The Webbs finished theirs by New Year's Day 1909; the commission

met for the last time later that month; and both reports were published on 2 February.

In the meantime, while the commission was sitting, Beatrice kept up a frenetic round of networking. On 11 March 1908, "Winston Churchill dined with us last night, together with Masterman, Beveridge, Morton: we talked exclusively shop." Two weeks later, "Gave AJB [Balfour] my poor law scheme while we were staying at Stanway." On 19 May, "I had a talk with John Burns at the L.G.B. about the Commission and the possibility of his bringing in a big poor law scheme" – and then went on to lunch with Haldane, secretary of state for war.⁷⁰

When it appeared, the Minority Report was signed by four members of the commission – Beatrice Webb herself, George Lansbury, Francis Chandler, the trades unionist, and Russell Wakefield, one of the clergymen. They said: "We find ourselves unable to agree with the Report of the majority of our colleagues. Our reasons will be plain when we have stated the facts as they have been revealed to us by the investigations, and set forth the reforms which, in our opinion, these facts irresistibly demand."⁷¹

Both the Webbs had a hand in the drafting. Beatrice had aimed at a rattling good report, vivid in fact, and the report that emerged is a savage indictment of the New Poor Law, in the tradition of Cobbett and Dickens. The 1834 report had set out to eliminate the general mixed workhouse: the 1909 Minority Report found that the combined efforts of local guardians and the central authority had not succeeded in this aim. The Minority Report describes the condition of women in a general mixed workhouse: "There are no separate bedrooms, there are not even separate cubicles. The young servant out of place, the prostitute recovering from disease, the feeble-minded woman of any age, the girl with her first baby, the unmarried mother coming in to be confined of her third or fourth bastard, the senile, the paralytic, the epileptic, the respectable deserted wife, the widow to whom Outdoor Relief has been refused, are all herded indiscriminately together."⁷²

Drawing on the research done for the commission, the Minority Report looked at infant mortality in the workhouse: "We were, therefore, interested in the mortality statistics of the 8,483 infants who were born in the Workhouses of the 450 Unions responding to the enquiry made by one of our members. Out of these 8,483 infants, no fewer than 1050 actually died on the premises before attaining one year." "A grave question arises on these statistics whether the policy of restricting out-door medical relief to expectant mothers, refusing Midwifery Orders, and offering only 'the House' for lying in, ought any longer to be allowed. If the effect of compelling the mothers to come into the Workhouse for their confinements is that twice or three times as many

of their babies will die as if they had been delivered in their own homes, we do not think the community will, or should, permit such a policy to continue."⁷³

The first part of the report goes on to look in detail at the care of children, the sick, the elderly, and what in the language of the day are termed "the mentally defective", savaging both policy and practice in the Poor Law. The second part of the Minority Report looks at unemployment and the labour market.

Figure 1 compares the recommendations of Majority and Minority. Both address the same issues; the Majority did not simply recommend reversion to 1834. But similarities in some of their detailed proposals should not obscure the fundamental philosophical differences between the two. Lancelot Phelps, a commissioner who was both an Oxford economist and a Poor Law guardian, said, "we take our stand on the old principle that destitution is the sole claim for relief", and spoke of "the hard truth that self-caused poverty is a crime".⁷⁴ Beatrice Webb, on the other hand, "set out to secure at all costs the abandonment of the category of destitution".⁷⁵ She wanted prevention, compulsion and universal provision.

For many if not all of the Majority, poverty was essentially a moral problem: for Beatrice Webb, although she shared some of the moral attitudes of her colleagues, poverty and unemployment had their origins in the structure of the economy. She later commented that "during its first year of office, the Royal Commission on the Poor Law drifted away from being an enquiry into the disease of pauperism, into an investigation into the disease of destitution".⁷⁶ The Minority Report played a part in shifting the debate from a concern with the relief of destitution to a concern with its prevention.

Figure 1: Comparing the Majority and Minority Reports

Subject	Majority Report	Minority Report
Organisation	Guardians to be replaced by a public assistance authority of the local councils	Guardians to go; Poor Law to be broken up, to be replaced by specialist committees of councils, co-ordinated by a registrar of public assistance. Specialist committees to be concerned with: (i) children of school age (ii) sick, elderly needing institutional care, etc (iii) mentally defective (iv) elderly receiving pensions
Indoor relief	General workhouse to be abolished and replaced by classified institutions	Separate institutions under the special committees
Outdoor relief	"Home assistance", applied on a case paper system in co-operation with voluntary aid committees. One uniform order for outdoor relief	"Home alimnt" controlled by the registrar of public assistance on the advice of the specialist committees
Children	To be taken out of the workhouse and boarded out	The responsibility of the education committee
The aged	Classified public assistance institutions, according to physical condition, record, behaviour, etc, with small homes where possible. Home assistance in other cases	The responsibility of the pension committee
Medical relief	Public assistance committee co-ordinating voluntary and statutory provision with provident dispensaries	Medical services under the health Committee, with the registrar recovering cost where necessary and possible
Employment and unemployment	Labour exchanges. Better industrial training for the young, with a raising of the school leaving age. Facilities for retraining older workers. Unemployment insurance conducted by the trade unions with some state assistance	A national authority, the Ministry of Labour, to organise the national labour market so as to prevent or minimise unemployment. Labour exchanges. Trade union unemployment insurance with state help. Training and retraining. Part-time further education for the young
Settlement	Modification and simplification of the law	Repeal

Source: Based on a table in Bruce, 1973

IX: The plunge into propaganda

Beatrice Webb was taken aback when, in February 1909, the Majority Report received better press coverage than the Minority. Exhausted, she and Sidney took a six-week holiday in Italy.

On their return, they set about establishing a public campaign in support of the recommendations of the Minority Report. This was a new departure for them: hitherto they had moved in the shadows, seeking to influence opinion, to permeate all parties. They had, indeed, recently seen off proposals from HG Wells to transform the Fabian Society into a mass campaigning organisation.

In May 1909 they established the National Committee for the Break-up of the Poor Law, changing its name a year later to the National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution. It had support from all parties, and its president was Russell Wakefield, the Dean of Norwich, and a signatory to the Minority Report. Offices were rented (conveniently situated on the Strand, between the Fabian Society and the London School of Economics), telephones installed, and staff hired. The secretary was CM Lloyd, who subsequently became head of the department of social science and administration at the LSE. Subcommittees were appointed, and when the meetings and membership subcommittee met for the first time in June, "it was announced that Mrs Webb had appointed Messrs CR Attlee and LEV Tiffen of her assistant secretaries to be secretaries of the sub committee."⁷⁷

Active campaigning was soon under way. In the summer of 1909, Rupert Brooke, Hugh Dalton and other Fabian students at Cambridge hired a cart and embarked on an anti-Poor Law speaking tour of Cambridgeshire villages.⁷⁸

The central output from the committee was in the form of the public lecture, usually by Beatrice or Sidney Webb. In the spring of 1910, they gave a course of six lectures in central London. Each lecture featured a well-known chairman – among them Gilbert Murray, Philip Snowden, Winston Churchill, and George Bernard Shaw. The programme for the series covered the contents of the Minority Report (see figure 2).

Similar courses of lectures were held all over the country. In November 1909, Beatrice recorded, "We are carrying on a raging, tearing propaganda, lecturing or speaking five or six times a week. We had ten days in the North of England and in Scotland – in nearly every place crowded and enthusiastic audiences."⁷⁹ Two weeks later, she noted: "Another two spells of lecturing – Sheffield, Leeds, Bradford and Hereford last week,

Bristol, Newport, Cardiff this week, Worcester, Birmingham, Manchester next week, a wearing sort of life."⁸⁰ And the following October, "Started on our autumn campaign. After lecturing at Bournemouth and Southampton, I returned to London for three days, and then journeyed to Hull, Middlesbrough and Darlington ... Splendid meeting at Middlesbrough – speaking for one hour to two thousand persons, with questions afterwards."⁸¹

Figure 2: Minority Report central London lecture programme, spring 1910⁸²

4 April 1910	The causes of destitution
11 April 1910	Public health administration as a means of reducing destitution
18 April 1910	The education service as a means of preventing destitution
25 April 1910	Unemployment and "sweating" as preventable diseases of industry
2 May 1910	The effective organisation of the labour market as an instrument for the reduction of destitution
9 May 1910	How near can we get to the abolition of destitution

Contemporaries left accounts of Beatrice Webb speaking at these meetings. Mary Agnes Hamilton, speaking in support of the Majority Report, once debated with Beatrice: "She was magnificent in a great hat with ostrich feathers, and of course swept her audience with her moving picture of the morass of destitution. I thought her arguments a trifle on the unscrupulous side, but she was not only a far better speaker but she had a better case, and it was not long before I saw it."⁸³ Ellen Wilkinson was joint secretary of the Manchester University Fabian Society in 1912; she wrote that Beatrice Webb "came to speak for us one afternoon in a dress of scarlet velvet and ermine ... Rather frightened, I took the great lady to tea. 'How do you like my dress,' she asked, 'I have had it made from my aunt's coronation robes.'"⁸⁴

There was more to the campaign than the great set-piece events with Beatrice and Sidney Webb. The committee prepared and circulated a set of 20 lessons on the Minority Report. There were study circles, correspondence classes, travelling book boxes, and a lending library for supporters. Individual supporters undertook speaking tours in areas untouched by the Webbs themselves.

The committee set out to attract a wide membership, although not all of them paid a subscription. Figure 3 traces the rise and fall of the membership:

Figure 3: National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution membership, 1909-12

Date	Members	Contributing
17 June 1909	300	
30 June 1909	600	
8 July 1909	900	
8 Feb 1910	20,710	3,200
15 June 1910	26,542	3,700
16 November 1910	30,112	4,145
March 1912	16,000	

Source: National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution, minutes of membership and meetings subcommittee, in LSE Coll Misc 0291

The high point for the committee was its first annual conference, held at Llanbedr on the North Wales coast for two weeks in August 1910. Delegates (73 people in the first week, 85 in the second) heard a lecture from either Beatrice or Sidney Webb every day, with other speakers and discussions and a limited social programme. Beatrice thought it "an *unqualified* success".⁸⁵ The conference was followed by four weeks of Fabian Summer School, but the atmosphere at the summer school was a little too frivolous for Beatrice, who wanted an organised school, not a "co-operative country holiday".

Further conferences took place in London in May 1911 and June 1912. These were on a different scale: each lasted a week; the first had over 1,100 delegates, the second over 700, drawn not only from the individual membership of the campaign, but also from local authorities, Poor Law unions, trades unions, and a wide range of other organisations. Both conferences were organised as a series of parallel sessions – the themes in 1912 were public health, education, housing, unemployment, and crime and inebriety – with the exception of the final section, almost exactly foreshadowing Beveridge's five giants.⁸⁶

But the National Insurance Bill was going through, and the impetus behind the committee was flagging. Membership began to decline. The last recorded meeting of the meetings and membership subcommittee, which took place on 19 September 1912, was told that the majority of the branches were moribund. "The possibility of arranging meetings in rural areas was also discussed, and Mr Lloyd stated that Mr Attlee was looking into the matter."⁸⁷

But by then new alliances were being formed. The Webbs for the first time joined the Independent Labour Party, and in 1912 the party and the Fabian Society launched a joint committee for a new "War on Poverty" campaign, holding a rally at the Royal Albert Hall on 12 October 1912. Ramsay MacDonald took the chair, and Beatrice Webb spoke, with George Lansbury and George Bernard Shaw among other speakers. The Woolwich Pioneer Choir led the audience in socialist hymns, beginning with the old Social Democratic Federation anthem, *England Arise*.

As the Webbs drew closer to the organised labour movement, so their other links fell away. In October 1909 Beatrice recorded: "Winston and his wife dined here the other night to meet a party of young Fabians He did not altogether like the news of our successful agitation. 'You should leave the work of converting the country to us, Mrs Webb, you ought to convert the cabinet.'"⁸⁸ The following summer, she noted: "we have been quite strangely dropped by the more distinguished of our acquaintances and by the Liberal ministers in particular. I have never had so few invitations as this season."⁸⁹ The salon politics which the Webbs had practised with such success was not compatible with their new commitment and alignment.

X: Dishing the Webbs

Despite its record of social reform, the pre-First World War Liberal government did not legislate on the Poor Law Report. To that extent, for the time being, the Webbs were not successful.

Sidney Webb had been a campaigner for old age pensions, and the pensions legislation of 1908 was the first step in taking elderly people out of the Poor Law. It was the first piece of anti-poverty legislation to be funded out of central taxation. An elderly person had to be "very old, very poor, and very respectable"⁹⁰ to qualify – but it was an important first step. The trades unionist Ben Tillett said it was the "first piece of socialism".⁹¹

Both the Majority and the Minority Report had recommended the creation of a national system of labour exchanges as part of the solution to unemployment. By the time the reports were published, Churchill at the Board of Trade was already far advanced with proposals for their introduction; he had secured Cabinet approval in December 1908, announced the policy just after the reports appeared, and introduced the bill in March. The first exchanges opened in February 1910, with Beveridge by now installed as an established Board of Trade civil servant to run the programme. And Churchill used the Webbs as a sort of labour exchange of his own, saying that he would take on anyone Beatrice really recommended "on my honour" – at least two managers of the labour exchange programme were recruited in this way.⁹²

The new labour exchanges were designed to operate alongside a scheme for contributory unemployment insurance. In late 1908, before the Cabinet decision on labour exchanges, Beveridge and Llewellyn Smith, the permanent secretary at the Board of Trade, were already working on an insurance scheme. Jose Harris writes: "It is not entirely clear how the decision to introduce national insurance into Britain was taken, since Lloyd George and Churchill each subsequently claimed the credit for himself."⁹³ The constitutional crises of 1910 had the effect of delaying the national insurance legislation; by the time it became law, the Board of Trade's proposals for unemployment insurance had been merged with Treasury plans for sickness insurance. The pre-war unemployment insurance scheme was restricted to a small number of industries, and left out most women and low-paid workers.

Beatrice Webb did not like the National Insurance Bill. Her objections to it stemmed from two quite different positions. On the one hand, both she and Sidney were supporters of trade union insurance. In their early writings on trades unionism, they

had identified the "method of mutual insurance" as one of the defining union activities. They did not want to see the state in competition with unions for the money of the workers. On the other, the moralist in Beatrice saw the new insurance benefits as unconditional. Although there were conditions – ensuring that claimants really were sick, and had not become unemployed voluntarily – these were not stringent enough for Beatrice. She described the proposed sickness insurance as "wholly bad". Initially, she felt inhibited from public criticism by the fact that "Lloyd George and Winston are the most favourable to the supersession of the poor law, and that it is these Ministers who are responsible for the insurance schemes. We have to dance on eggs without cracking them."⁹⁴

Sidney Webb was less dogmatically opposed: "Sidney, on the whole, wishes the bill to go through."⁹⁵ He thought the big issue was to get the money voted. The details could be amended later. But Beatrice went on to make common cause with other opponents, including Hilaire Belloc, who described the National Insurance Bill as a "vile enslaving measure" and a "tax on the poor."⁹⁶ George Lansbury, a fellow-signatory of the Minority Report, also opposed the bill: "I objected to the contributory principle as being anti-Socialist I thought then, as I think now, that the Party ought to have taken its stand and fought for non-contributory schemes, but was always beaten at party meetings."⁹⁷

Lloyd George, however, was supported by most of the parliamentary Labour Party, including its leader, Ramsay MacDonald, and by the TUC. When an amendment opposing the contributory principle was considered in the House of Commons, only nine members supported it.

When the National Insurance Bill went through, the Webbs believed they had lost a battle, and their opponents believed they had won – though as so often, the evidence comes from Beatrice herself: "Lansbury told us that Masterman came up to him after Lloyd George's triumphant exposition of his scheme with a pleasant jeering expression: 'We have spiked your guns, eh?' showing that he is hostile to the whole conception of the Minority Report and that the Government schemes are intended as an alternative method of dealing with the question of destitution. John Burns also goes about saying that insurance has finally 'dished the Webbs'."⁹⁸

Why was this possible? Why was the agitation around the Minority Report unsuccessful? In the first place, for all their networking, the Webbs did not succeed in forging effective long-term alliances with the key ministers. Their closest ally in the government was Haldane, who although at one stage asked by Asquith to work

on Poor Law policy, was fully occupied as secretary of state for war, a remaining Limp in a Cabinet where the pro-Boers had the upper hand.

A practical alternative to the policies and analysis of the Minority Report emerged in the form of national insurance. It was attractive to ministers because the contributory principle appeared to provide a way of controlling costs. It was worked up by civil servants in the Treasury and the Board of Trade, and so was "owned" by the departments.

And, critically, the insurance approach was supported by most of the labour movement: the TUC, the friendly societies, and the Labour leadership. MacDonald had form in disagreements with the Webbs, and had no doubts about the contributory principle: "without some system of premium payment, the whole scheme would degenerate into a national charity of the most vicious kind, which would adversely affect wages and would not help the Socialist spirit".⁹⁹

The ally the Webbs needed was the president of the Local Government Board. But their attempts to cultivate John Burns were unsuccessful. Jose Harris describes Burns' attitude to social reform as "extremely ambiguous", saying that by the time he became a minister in 1905, he was convinced of the intemperance and personal inferiority of many of the unemployed.¹⁰⁰ Within government, he opposed the establishment of labour exchanges, seeing them as helping strike breakers. Asquith allocated responsibility for developing new social reforms such as old age pensions and national insurance to departments other than the Local Government Board.

Something of the flavour of Burns' opposition to the Webbs and their policies can be seen in a letter he sent to their other foe, HG Wells, in 1910: "The new helotry in the servile state run by the archivists of the School of Economics means a race of paupers in a grovelling community ruled by uniformed prigs. Rely upon me saving you from this plague."¹⁰¹ Ensor (a Webb disciple) commented that, although both the Majority and the Minority wanted reform, "Burns single-handedly fended them off, until early in 1914 he was at last sent to another post."¹⁰² And Brown, Burns' most recent biographer, judged that by 1909 "Burns was likely to oppose on principle anything the Webbs proposed".¹⁰³

And where the Fabians were dismissive of Burns, his old allies of the 1880s were contemptuous. HM Hyndman, with whom Burns had worked in the Social Democratic Federation, contributed a foreword to a critical biography:

"Even so lately as 1906, when he entered the Liberal Cabinet and became a servile courtier, there were still some who imagined that Burns was honest But that he should have used and should be using today his official position as head of the Administration of the Poor Law in this country to injure the unemployed and harass the miserable in every way he possibly can, is conduct which is quite unpardonable ..."¹⁰⁴

By 1914 Burns' enthusiasm for his work at the Local Government Board was limited; Asquith's offer of a move to the Board of Trade reached him in the billiard room at the National Liberal Club. Burns' time at the Board of Trade continued the pattern established at the Local Government Board: Beveridge, now an established Board of Trade civil servant, wrote to his mother that "our new president is not particularly active and this gives us a very peaceful time."¹⁰⁵ Within a few months, he had left government altogether, one of two Liberal ministers to resign when war broke out.

Although by 1914 there had been no comprehensive legislation to bring an end to the Poor Law, there had, since 1906, been a major change in the role of the state in relation to the labour market and welfare. Government had shied away from challenging the major vested interests in the Poor Law system, including the elected guardians; and had not begun the process of changing local government finance, upon which the Poor Law rested. But they had begun the process of transferring substantial groups out of the Poor Law – the elderly, the sick, and the unemployed.

The Local Government Board also took some limited steps to humanise Poor Law administration: "John Burns, hoping to forestall the break-up of the Poor law, had attempted to hasten institutional improvements, and by 1913 the Board had developed a policy which would have involved compulsory removal of children from workhouses, more medical staff with greater authority, and more money spent on the Poor Law institutions."¹⁰⁶ Burns himself said that he "had taken both the majority and the minority report of the Royal Commission to see what was good and practical in them, and I have tried immediately to apply the recommendations, either in the mitigation of poverty or in the solution of those great problems."¹⁰⁷

At the same time, however, the board, with Burns' active involvement, prepared a new draft Poor Law order, stressing the value of the principle of less eligibility. This provoked widespread opposition, led by the Webbs' National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution, and supported by the Labour MPs. Crowther offers a more sympathetic judgment of Burns' record than others: "Ironically, Burns was one of the few heads of the central authority to be interested in his work. Undoubtedly vain, he was soured by his relationships with the permanent officials on one hand and his former Labour

colleagues on the other. He saw himself 'wrestling with fossils inside and fools and firebrands outside.'¹⁰⁸

XI. Aftermath

War broke out seven months after Burns left the Local Government Board, with still no Poor Law legislation; and the war, in the words of CM Lloyd, "gave Bumble a respite".¹⁰⁹ The rapid expansion, first, of the armed forces, and subsequently of war production, had a dramatic impact on the labour market. As Gareth Stedman Jones writes, "All 'surplus' labour was absorbed by the needs of the wartime economy. The workhouses emptied and the casual wards shut down. The phenomenon of casual labour itself almost disappeared."¹¹⁰ The number of paupers in England and Wales, whether in workhouses or on outdoor relief, fell steadily from 641,028 in 1914 to 446,565 in 1918, beginning to rise again in 1919.¹¹¹ In January 1916 Beatrice Webb commented: "The British working man, his wife and daughters are making good money – better than ever before – and they are working longer hours and have no time to be discontented."¹¹²

Labour movement attitudes to the war were divided: like Burns, the Independent Labour Party, including Ramsay MacDonald, opposed the war. Most Fabians accepted the fact of the war; Sidney Webb quickly came to play a leading role in the War Emergency Workers' National Committee, although Beatrice was depressed by the suffering. In 1915 she wrote in her diary: "I am haunted by the fear that all my struggles may be in vain, that disease and death are moving with relentless certainty."¹¹³ Towards the end of the war, Beatrice was appointed a member of a government committee on reconstruction, with responsibility for Poor Law policy. Lord George Hamilton was also a member, and the committee's report in effect resolved the differences between the Minority and Majority reports in line with the views of the Minority. But still there was no legislation. Despite the plans made in wartime, and the pledges at the 1918 coupon election, social reform was not a priority for the post-war coalition government.

The wartime boom did not end immediately. It continued through 1919 and into 1920; wages and prices continued to increase. In 1920, Lloyd George extended the pre-war, narrow unemployment insurance to cover most of the working population. The collapse began in late 1920, and gathered pace in 1921. Unemployment, which had stood at 0.8% in 1918, and 2% in 1920, rose rapidly.

The new unemployment insurance legislation came into force in December 1920, and a consistent series of statistics starts at that point. In December 1920, the unemployment rate for the insured population stood at 7.8%, rising to 23% in May 1921 at the height of the coal strike. The average for the years 1921-31 was 13.04%; throughout the inter-war period, unemployment only fell below 10% for short periods.

Faced with unemployment on this scale the insurance system could not cope. Entitlement to benefit was supposed to be earned with a record of contributions, and was time limited. But there was no opportunity for workers to earn their entitlement with sufficient contributions – and no realistic prospect, in many parts of the country, for people to find work after spells on benefit. Instead, temporary extensions of benefit, unsupported by contributions, were introduced.

Thomas Jones, who was Cabinet secretary in the 1920s, tells the story in his diaries: "Unfortunately, things were not normal after the war. On the contrary we had a depression in trade unparalleled in the width of the field it covered; all industries were depressed; the chances of help from neighbours vanished because all workpeople were in the same conditions and had reached the end of their resources. Parliament was faced with a situation which was obviously directly due to the war; public opinion recognised this fact and demanded that some provision should be made to meet it. This took the form of uncovenanted benefit, or grants to persons who had not earned them by means of their contributions. Plain men called this a 'dole'. It was in fact indistinguishable from out-relief given by Guardians, but it had over it a cloak of respectability. Working men were told they had a right to such benefit. They came to the Fund and took the 'dole'. When it ceased to be available in the particular case no disgrace was felt in turning to the Guardians for assistance and the Guardians forgetting, or putting aside their former policy, felt no wrong in giving relief in these cases."¹¹⁴

While the introduction of national insurance had had the effect of placing the cost of relieving unemployment on national, rather than local, budgets, the fact that, once insurance benefits were exhausted, the unemployed returned to the guardians meant that the cost was met by the ratepayer.

Where local boards of guardians attempted, at the start of the period of unemployment, to enforce the workhouse test and refuse outdoor relief, they were overwhelmed by mass resistance from unemployed people and the new organisations of ex-servicemen and unemployed. The young Aneurin Bevan described one of those campaigns: "The conditions demanded by Whitehall were unacceptable to the unemployed, for they involved semi starvation. So the unemployed marched on the workhouse at Tredegar where the Guardians were meeting." And the guardians were locked in for two days and nights.¹¹⁵ Wal Hannington describes many similar incidents.¹¹⁶

The principle of "less eligibility" was finally losing its force; the power of the central authority (the Local Government Board had been replaced by a new Ministry of

Health in 1919) was no longer sufficient to prevent the spread of outdoor relief.

Finally, in 1929, a Conservative government legislated to abolish the boards of guardians. Their powers, duties and assets were transferred to the county and county borough councils, each of which was required to form a public assistance committee. Councils were permitted – but not instructed – to transfer responsibility for other functions, such as the care of children or the sick, to their other committees. *Administration* of the Poor Law was transferred; *reform* of the Poor Law was left to the local authorities: “Poor Law relief remained Poor Law relief, and pauperism remained pauperism except for a few small modifications.”¹¹⁷ Even the Local Government Act of 1929 did not constitute the break-up of the Poor Law.

The Edwardian Liberal government had set an important precedent in the introduction of the old age pension and national insurance. Before that time the only public agencies with responsibility for the elderly, the sick, or the unemployed were the local boards of guardians. Afterwards, the central state had a role. That role grew with the extension of national insurance in 1920, and the extension of pensions on a contributory basis in 1925. But the weak actuarial basis of unemployment insurance had in the event thrown many of the unemployed back on the Poor Law. In 1929, therefore, when responsibility for poor relief passed to local government, two parallel systems for cash payments were in existence, one run by local authorities, the other by the Ministry of Labour. This duplication was disliked by the Treasury. Over time, responsibility for cash payments passed to central government. In 1934, a new Unemployment Assistance Board was established, under the Ministry of Labour. The board was responsible for paying unemployment assistance to those who did not qualify for unemployment benefit based on contributions. In 1940, the Unemployment Assistance Board became the Assistance Board, responsible for paying a supplement to those on fixed incomes which were inadequate for subsistence. The Assistance Board gave way in 1948 to the National Assistance Board, replaced in its turn by the Supplementary Benefits Commission. Even in 1947, when the National Assistance Bill was introduced, there were still 400,000 people dependent on outdoor relief.

As far as the other Poor Law services were concerned, from 1929 to 1948 local authorities worked, essentially, within a Poor Law framework. Labour took control of the London County Council for the first time in 1934; in 1936, the party expressed a determination that “London’s municipal hospitals shall provide a service second to none, free from any taint of the Poor Law”.¹¹⁸

As well, therefore, as repealing a long list of Poor Law Acts, stretching back to the 18th

century, and setting up the National Assistance Board, the 1948 National Assistance Act laid down the legal basis for modern local government welfare services. Part III of the act makes provision, not just for elderly people, but for homelessness as well:

"It shall be the duty of every local authority, subject to and in accordance with the provisions of this Part of this Act, to provide –

"(a) residential accommodation for persons who by reason of age, infirmity or any other circumstances are in need of care and attention which is not otherwise available to them;

"(b) temporary accommodation for persons who are in urgent need thereof, being need arising in circumstances which could not reasonably have been foreseen or in such other circumstances as the authority may in any particular case determine."¹¹⁹

Perhaps, therefore, 1948 was the real break-up of the Poor Law: the guardians had gone, outdoor relief had become part of a national scheme for social security, and the institutions were being integrated into wider local authority welfare services. Even so, the Bastilles were a long time dying. Crowther, in a study of workhouses, writes: "In 1960, about 51 per cent of local authority accommodation was still in old workhouse buildings. The principle of 'less eligibility' no longer applied to inmates under the welfare state but in the long dormitories and reverberating corridors of the old workhouses, the sense of change was muted. The present continued to inhabit the shell of the past."¹²⁰

Neither Beatrice nor Sidney Webb lived to see the passing of the National Assistance Act. But the Cabinet that led the second great wave of 20th-century social reform was composed of the generation that had grown up with the agitation for the break-up of the Poor Law and the prevention of destitution. Where some earlier socialists had seen social reform as a dangerous distraction from the real business of economic socialism, for the 1945 government it was central. And, in contrast to the period after the First World War, plans for social reform were not postponed.

The ministers responsible for the legislation on national insurance, national assistance and health were the Welsh miners, James Griffiths and Aneurin Bevan, who had fought against the Poor Law in its final days. The government was led by the veterans of the National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution: Attlee, the prime minister, had organised the meetings; Dalton, the first Chancellor, had taken a cart round Cambridgeshire villages campaigning for the Minority Report; Cripps,

who succeeded Dalton as Chancellor, was Beatrice Webb's nephew; Ellen Wilkinson, the education minister, had organised meetings for Beatrice in Manchester as a student at the height of the Poor Law campaign.

XII. 'The existing Poor Law shall cease to have effect'

The ashes of Beatrice and Sidney Webb were interred in Westminster Abbey in December 1947.

Speaking on 24 November, on the second reading of the National Assistance Bill, Aneurin Bevan – minister of health, and so the successor to the central authority of the New Poor Law – had spoken of the role of the Webbs: "I am sure that hon. Members in all parts of the House would wish me to take this opportunity of paying a warm and sincere tribute to the services of Beatrice and Sidney Webb. They made a most distinguished contribution towards thought on this subject, but they were not alone. There were many others, in all parties and in all fields of public activity, and now we are to see the consummation of their efforts."¹²¹

The campaign to break up the Poor Law had taken longer than the Edwardian enthusiasts had expected. Of the principles of 1834, one – the central authority – reappeared in the new legislation, giving the minister the power to make regulations for local authorities.

The principle of less eligibility had been a stubborn survivor. JS Davy of the Local Government Board had incautiously told Beatrice Webb in December 1905 that the Poor Law officials intended that the Royal Commission should reaffirm less eligibility. John Burns had tried to restate it in his draft order in 1911. Tom Jones described how, in the conditions of the 1920s, it had lost its force. But health ministers, even while accepting that outdoor relief was being paid, had tried to use their authority to restrict the amounts. In 1934, when unemployment assistance became a national charge, the individual test of means applied by the guardians had become a household means test – but it was still hated and unpopular.

The workhouse test had gone – after the mass campaigns of the early 1920s, there were no further attempts to force able-bodied unemployed into the workhouse. But the buildings themselves still stood. There had been some improvements by the end of the 19th century; the limited old age pension introduced in 1908 for the "very old, very poor, and very respectable"¹²² had removed some elderly people from the workhouse, and Chamberlain's extension of pensions in 1925 had removed more. And there had been some further administrative improvements in the last years of Burns' long tenure at the Local Government Board – when the workhouse had been officially rebranded as the "institution". The transfer of responsibility to local authorities in 1929 had enabled some local authorities to begin to improve conditions, and would continue after 1948.

In the years before the First World War, Sidney and Beatrice Webb gradually became more involved with, and identified with, the Labour Party. The previous Fabian strategy, of “permeating” all parties, was left behind. But the Labour Party that emerged between the wars and which won power in 1945 was partly shaped by their experience, an alliance between the radical campaigners against the Poor Law and trades unionists. Social reform was at the heart of the programme; in the end, the break-up of the Poor Law demanded a new political force.

Notes

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- 2 Cd 4499, 1909, vol III
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The Minority Report

In 1905 a Royal Commission was appointed to review the Poor Laws – Britain's limited, harsh, often punitive welfare system, which dated back to 1834 and in parts to 1601. Beatrice Webb was appointed a member of the Commission, and soon despaired of most of the other members.

In 1909 Beatrice produced a Minority Report, calling for the break up of the Poor Law, while the majority of the Commission's members called for more limited reforms. The Minority Report analysed the causes of poverty and unemployment as economic, rather than moral. It paved the way for the creation of the welfare state.

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The Webb Memorial Trust

The Webb Memorial Trust has pursued the intellectual legacy of Beatrice Webb (1858–1943), who, together with her husband Sydney (1859–1947), embarked on a vigorous programme of social reform. The trust was formed in 1947 with the purpose of 'the advancement of education and learning with respect to the history and problems of government and social policy'. Founding trustees included R H Tawney and Harold Laski.

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Website: www.webbmemorialtrust.org.uk

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