

Review

The Stigma of Poverty: Challenges, Interventions and Possibilities

29 September 2016, Scottish Parliament

The event was sponsored by Scottish Green Party MSP Patrick Harvie, co-organised by the University of Liverpool, University of Leeds, the Social Policy Association and Poverty Alliance, and featured academics and professionals from each of the organisations, as well as both Glasgow Caledonian University and NHS Health Scotland.

Following a brief explanation of the event format from our chair for the night, the University of Leeds' Dr Kim Allen, Patrick opened proceedings by informing us that he had sponsored the night's proceedings and arranged to host the event at Holyrood as he feels it essential that the Scottish public have access to what should be rights by their building. He stressed that it is only through public engagement alongside professionals, academics, and policymakers that Scotland can truly hope to make progress in challenging the root causes of and social stigma attached to poverty.

Professor John McKendrick of the Glasgow School for Business and Society at Glasgow Caledonian University, and Co-editor of the Poverty in Scotland 2016 report, was the first to present. John described himself as an optimist in that he believes we have the opportunity and resources to reduce and ultimately eradicate poverty in Scotland – which he sharply contrasted by highlighting that many in Scottish society consider poverty an inevitability. Whilst he acknowledged that the UK Conservative Party are to a large degree responsible for the current political ideology and rhetoric that is pushing more and more Scots into poverty in all of its forms, he stressed that the Scottish Tories contribute positively with the national context, offering particular commendation for the efforts of Scottish Conservative Leader, Ruth Davidson. However, in perhaps his most startling comment, John suggested that, whilst Scotland is the only UK nation to ensure that poverty remains

ever present on the political agenda, we are also the society most likely to place blame on the individual – ‘their own actions have led them to this’ – and the quickest to cite alcoholism and drug addiction in parents as the root cause of child poverty.

In a joint presentation, post-doctoral researcher at the University of Liverpool, Ruth Patrick, and the University of Leeds’ Professor of Sociology and Social Policy, Tracy Shildrick presented their findings on ‘Poverty Propaganda’. Whilst John had suggested that poverty as a social issue remains on the political agenda in Scotland, Ruth and Tracy noted that poverty has slipped further and further from UK media output. Instead, stories regarding the social circumstances of UK citizens have been reduced to familiar and recurring sound bites – ‘hard working families’, ‘the work shy’, families who haven’t worked for generations’. Indeed, so ingrained are these terms within our everyday political discourse that the Poverty Propaganda case studies presented highlighted public anxiety by showcasing the stigma faced by many unemployed citizens for ‘being out and about during the day’. Another case study quoted a lass who had informed researchers that she was ‘sick of scrounging’, further demonstrating the perceived low self worth and internalization of poverty stigma propagated by the popular media.

Carla McCormack, Policy and Parliamentary Officer at the Poverty Alliance, proceeded to discuss their anti-poverty campaign *Stick Your Labels* – an initiative that pushes organisations and workers to consider their own stances and attitudes towards those experiencing poverty. Carla stressed that people are resourceful – many get by on very little, yet when it comes to engaging and interacting with support services, often it is the stigma and victim-blaming from those in positions of power that can be most damaging. Part of the *Stick Your Labels* campaign demands that support services make pledges with regards to their attitude towards those that they support, particularly given that blaming those experiencing poverty removes culpability from council, governments, and policy makers. One such organization to have signed up is NHS Health Scotland.

Perhaps fittingly, NHS Health Scotland CEO Gerry McLaughlin was next to present. He suggested that many who are above the poverty line in Scotland give little thought to those below, and yet he believes those in positions of authority and power have the moral duty to speak out about the political issues and social stigma attached to poverty. Such attitudes, belittling and dehumanizing those experiencing poverty, have a massively detrimental impact on mental health and stress levels. Of all the speakers, Gerry was the one to give the greatest mention to those experiencing working poverty, offering the example of low-paid NHS workers on incomes that position them well below the poverty line, despite being in full-time employment.

As the conversation was opened up by the experts and professionals to include audience comments, I echoed statements from both Tracy and Gerry by highlighting that many of us who are employed in forms of support work find ourselves on incomes below the poverty line – despite working highly unsociable hours in often stressful and at times dangerous environments. I myself am a Support Worker in an overnight capacity with a transitions project, supporting young people who have experiences ranging from substance abuse and difficult domestic environments, to issues whilst in care and homelessness, yet earn well below £10,000 a year. This is despite being paid hours for internal training, taking on many cover shifts, and receiving an overnight allowance that works out at just £\$3.22 an hour, whilst the office is closed between 23.00 and 09:00. Despite being contracted to be onsite more than 144 hours every four weeks, I am paid a full wage for just 60 of these. I also know of similar organisations, though not my own, who refuse to even recognize trade unions such as UNITE, further isolating their own workers.

Other audience members stressed that those with lived experience of poverty need to be included in political discussions and inform policy, rather than simply a group of perceived experts dictating policy in a top-down style, as has happened historically. Offering people choice in their support was an issue highlighted by several attendees, with Ruth Patrick suggesting that enabling citizens to negotiate their own time slot for a Job Centre meeting, in the same way as they would schedule a GP appointment, could vastly improve the current situation, where claimants have little or no say in

when and where to attend. The conversation continued outside of the conference room as well, with Twitter users offering further evidence of Scotland's poverty issues e.g. one in four children in Dundee living in poverty.

From a personal perspective, I found this to be a very emotional event. Scotland has some amazing policies to support the population – for example, the Scottish Government paying tuition fees to attend college and university at undergraduate level and, to a very limited extent, postgraduate level. Without such policies I know that I, along with my undergraduate classmates, would not have been able to afford an education at the University of Edinburgh. I myself am now faced with the decision over whether to seek to further my education at my own cost – an amount higher than my current annual income, all for the purpose of better enabling me to work with others who have similar experiences in a support capacity. For all of us in Scotland and beyond, it is essential that we give serious consideration to what we as a nation, in a UK, EU or independent context can do to eradicate poverty stigma, and to challenge the policies and ideologies that see around one in five Scots face a life in poverty.

Luke Campbell

Recent graduate

BA (Hons) Community Education