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#ConditionOfBritain

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## Understanding the real pressures and hidden potential in today's society

### A new flagship IPPR research programme

Britain is a wonderful country with a unique history, great strengths and compassionate, creative people. But economic turmoil and deeper social trends are testing our society and placing real strains on people's lives.

In this context, IPPR is launching a new flagship research programme to better understand the everyday pressures facing people in Britain and the potential we have to overcome these challenges together. We will talk to people across the country about the strains they are under and what it would take to relieve some of the pressure. Combined with rigorous analysis of the latest data and trends, we hope to generate new insights into the 'condition of Britain' today and identify the resources and energies which could be mobilised to improve society – in the process helping to define the central challenges for social policy over the coming decade.

In the mid-1990s, IPPR's Commission on Social Justice played a leading role in rethinking the centre-left's approach to policy on welfare, work and families with an influential agenda for national renewal. In this spirit, IPPR is again asking what the major contemporary challenges facing British society are and the sort of politics needed to meet them.

### Everyday pressures and anxieties

Across Britain, many people are facing a combination of issues that are putting a real strain on their lives and creating a sense of anxiety about aspects of contemporary society – and the direction the country is headed. Many of us are under financial pressures as above-inflation increases in rents, energy and food prices drive up the cost of living, while average wages have barely grown in real terms over the last decade. The assumption that living standards will steadily rise as the economy grows no longer holds true, putting many families under financial strain, not just the poorest. However, when times are tough, the welfare system often fails to provide enough protection and security, and bears little relation to people's previous contributions. These pressures can push families into unmanageable debt, with an estimated 1.2 million people turning to payday loans each year.

The main source of rising living standards over the last four decades has been the growing number of women in work, but the revolution in women's lives remains unfinished, in large part because of the inadequate response to the challenge of care. Families of all shapes and sizes find it difficult to juggle work and care, and to devote enough time to their children and to each other. There are also growing concerns about the pressures of commercialisation on childhood, unequal life chances that start from an early age, and the difficulties many young people experience in making the transition into adulthood.

In addition, a growing number of us will experience a common mental health problem like depression or anxiety in our lifetime and a third of all families include someone who is currently mentally ill. Yet only a quarter of mentally ill people are receiving treatment. One in ten older people say they feel lonely most or all of the time, and the pressures on our social care system can mean that people with care needs are not treated with dignity.

In many neighbourhoods, there is significant concern about the pace of change. Sometimes this is about the churn in population, including the impact of new arrivals, but it also extends to concerns about the influence of big business on our high streets and a sense of powerlessness about decisions that affect our local communities. Although crime has steadily fallen over the last decade, anti-social behaviour and a general sense of incivility are still major problems in too many neighbourhoods.

The extent and nature of these pressures varies across people and places and over time. Our sense is that they are united by the feeling of powerlessness and a lack of control over the things that affect our lives and matter to us – whether it's having enough money to take part in everyday activities, being able to make our own choices about work and care, or having a say about what happens in our local neighbourhoods. Through our programme of work, we will test our hypothesis that these are the major areas of concern about British society, and seek to develop a deeper and richer understanding of the nature of these concerns, their causes and effects, and what they mean for the priorities and practices of politics.

### Strength as well as strain

Unlike those who claim that Britain is broken, we think that the story of our society is one of strength as well as strain. Our communities are full of caring, energetic and innovative people devoted to supporting their families and making their areas good places to live. One quarter of adults take part in formal volunteering at least once a month and one in ten of us care for sick or elderly relatives. Hundreds more come together in community groups, tenants associations, churches, mosques and temples, or get involved in local politics and campaigns, and we provide love and support to our friends and families every day. Despite serious financial pressures and a lack of real power, local government is innovating in many areas, whether finding new ways to work with local communities to deliver services or helping to spread the living wage among local businesses.

In short, there is huge potential and resources in society which could be unlocked or put to better use and our work will be informed by these collective and individual strengths. We know that people and organisations are showing amazing resilience in neighbourhoods all over Britain, and we will seek to understand how these resources and energy can be mobilised. We start from the belief that people are best placed to solve their own problems – and don't want to live in dependency – but also that the conditions to make success possible will not emerge naturally.

### A new take on society

Since the financial crash, there has been a vibrant debate about economic policy and a new understanding of the need for radical economic reform is beginning to emerge. Although much more work is needed to develop specific policy responses as well as the necessary alliances and institutions, it is clear that major rethinking is underway.

We have done much less rethinking about how our ambitions for society or our instincts on social policy must change as we face a new era of limited public budgets and uncertain economic prospects. This new programme of work is designed to kick-start this debate, providing fresh analysis and insight, and highlighting the new challenges to which politics must respond.

IPPR's Commission on Social Justice helped to shape the centre-left's approach to a range of social policy questions during the mid-1990s and much of the 2000s. Its major contribution was the proposition that social justice can and must go hand-in-hand with a strong economy. We now find ourselves in a new era of faltering living standards, uncertain prospects for growth and limited public budgets, so we cannot simply reach for yesterday's solutions. Similarly, we must learn the lessons of the last Labour government which, on many issues relating to society, was too hands-off with the market and too hands-on with the state.

More recently, new thinking on social policy was advanced in the work of the Centre for Social Justice and its analysis of 'broken Britain'. This was highly successful in capturing some of the concerns about British society in the mid-2000s, but struck an overly negative tone, while risking the perpetuation of an underclass narrative. Its critique of the 'big state' was important but overblown and ignored the ways in which unconstrained markets can also undermine society. It also rested on an overly traditional version of family and community, making it feel less relevant in 21st century Britain.

By contrast, it is possible – and necessary – to retain faith in the power of the state to advance core social goals, but to guard against unaccountable and bureaucratic forms of state power. Similarly, while markets can be hugely creative, they also have the capacity to disempower and dominate society. Families are the bedrock of society, but they can come in all shapes and sizes. In future, we must seek out new ways to work together to use the state, markets and civil society to develop collective solutions to our shared problems.

Beyond the specific issues at play, there is also an emerging debate about our fundamental goals and ambitions for society, for instance whether our priority should be more equality or more democracy, and how to reconcile the two. There are also growing calls to rethink dominant approaches to governing, to identify in which areas the central state can deliver solutions and where it needs to act in an enabling capacity. The fiscal and economic context over the next decade suggests an ever greater need to identify priorities for public action, with big questions about whether our focus should be on traditional social democratic themes like pensions and the NHS, or newer pressures like loneliness and care. And there is an important debate about how treasured traditions and institutions can be protected in an inclusive and forward-looking way.

## IPPR's programme of work

To start to address some of these issues, IPPR is launching a major new programme of work that will run over 2013. The work has three main objectives:

1. to understand the major pressures and anxieties facing people across Britain today, who they affect and how they have come about
2. to consider what it might take to ease these pressures, what resources exist to make progress on important social goals, and where responsibility for action should lie
3. to reorientate the goals, priorities and methods of centre-left politics to respond to these challenges.

To answer these questions, we will use a range of methods, drawing on everyday stories and new analysis, as well as the latest thinking on key policy and political questions. Our research will include:

- a series of visits across Britain, where we will speak to community leaders, business leaders and people working in the third sector and the public sector
- in-depth research with people from all walks of life using innovative research methods to understand more about their everyday experiences and concerns
- new analysis of quantitative and qualitative data to set out the key trends and pressures facing British society
- commissioning new essays and analytical papers from leading political thinkers, policy experts, analysts, practitioners and community leaders
- a programme of seminars to explore particular questions and new approaches in depth
- a wide and active advisory group to challenge our thinking and put us in touch with creative people and organisations across the country.

Throughout 2013 we will publish a series of briefing papers and essays with new thinking and analysis on core social issues, which will be accompanied by a series of seminars to bring together leading thinkers, analysts and practitioners. We plan to publish a final report towards the end of 2013.

We can only understand the 'condition of Britain' if we hear the everyday stories of people across the country, so we will be inviting everyone to participate in the work through social media, a call for evidence, face-to-face discussions and visits to projects and organisations across the country.

### Key contact

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