

Review of 'The Impact of Sure Start' by the National Evaluation of Sure Start

Abstract

The first report from the national Sure Start evaluation team concludes that to date not only has the Sure Start programme not been a success, but for certain groups of disadvantaged families it has led to a worse outcome. The cost to date has been £3 billion.

This is simply the latest in a series of spectacular policy failures. For example, the Child Support Agency, family tax credits, truancy reduction, lack of literacy amongst many children, reductions in access to top universities from state schools.

Each has its own reasons for failure, but there are now so many examples in so many diverse areas that something more fundamental is going on.

The problem is the increasingly complicated nature of the interventions of the social democratic state. These increase rather than reduce the probability of failure. Government still has an important role. But it should be as simple as possible.

The first report from the national Sure Start evaluation team has caused shockwaves considerably beyond its own particular remit. In essence, the team conclude that to date not only has the Sure Start programme not been a success, but for certain groups of disadvantaged families it has led to a worse outcome. Politicians and media commentators had built very considerable hopes on this programme, hopes which the first formal evaluation of the scheme has confounded. And the cost to date of the programme has been £3 billion.

The implications of the report go far beyond the particular confines of the Sure Start initiative itself. They call into question the effectiveness of the model of social democracy which has developed over the past 30 years or so. More than ever before, this model has involved detailed and increasingly complicated interventions in many

aspects of economic and social life. These are all well motivated. But, as is becoming clear, they often fail.

But first the Sure Start programme itself and its formal evaluation. A distinguished team of experts has been assembled, based on Birkbeck College and drawing on a much wider pool of expertise. Their methodology is thorough and rigorous in a way which makes it very difficult to challenge their findings.

The aim of Sure Start is to enhance the functioning of children and families by improving services provided in the local programme areas. But the assessment team can find very little evidence that the programme has achieved its goals. Further, children from relatively disadvantaged families (teen mothers, lone parents and workless households) appear to be adversely affected by living in an area with a Sure Start programme.

This latter finding may appear paradoxical. An increase in resources has led to a worse outcome. But less disadvantaged families may be better equipped to take advantage of Sure Start services and resources, leaving others with less access to services than would have been the case if they had not lived in these areas. Certainly, this asymmetry of effectiveness on different groups is mirrored in the American Head Start programme. This is the model for Sure Start and has been in existence for much longer. Head Start evaluations suggest, for example, that white families are more likely to benefit from the intervention than black families, where the impact of the programme is often difficult to discern.

Sure Start is by no means the only initiative where, recently, the outcome has been revealed to be much less favourable than anticipated. Martin Kettle's article in the *Guardian* of 24 September draws attention to a number of these. Britain's top universities are now admitting a lower proportion of candidates from state schools than they were the year before. The government has expended very considerable energy and hundreds of millions of pounds in trying to increase the proportion. Nearly £1 billion has been spent since 1997 trying to tackle truancy, yet the number of truants has risen by a third. Almost incredibly, as Kettle's fellow columnist at the *Guardian* Polly Toynbee pointed out on 4 October, one third of 11 year olds are

unable to write. And this 60 years on from the 1944 Education Act. As Kettle rightly says, these are not failures which can be easily explained away. Education has been repeatedly identified as the government's number 1 priority.

Kettle goes on. The family tax credit scheme has been a total disaster, with more than a million families receiving the wrong amounts of money, and many poor families now being compelled to make repayments. Child benefit is simple, easy to understand and has a take up rate of close to 100 per cent. A simple way of helping families would have been to increase child benefit. Instead, we have the fiasco of family tax credit, based on a urge to micro-manage in great detail.

The problem is not particular to Labour. The Child Support Agency, set up under John Major, is now, in Frank Field's words, 'in meltdown'. A billion pounds of uncollected maintenance has had to be written off, and a further billion awaits collection. Field extends his argument to the whole of the welfare system where a failure to deliver has become 'not the exception but the norm'.

We have now had 60 years of the social democratic model of a state very much larger in relation to the economy than anything which had gone before. Claims on national resources by the state in the second half of the 20th century were around two and a half times larger than in the first half. Even Mrs Thatcher failed to turn the tide. The state under her absorbed a greater proportion of national income than it did under Attlee.

Yet economic and social problems not only persist, but often intensify and the grandiose schemes put in place to solve them end in failure. To give yet another example, the Office for National Statistics recently concluded that inequalities of income and wealth in the UK had widened and not narrowed since 1997.

Each policy, each programme which fails has, in retrospect, its own particular reasons. But there are now so many, in so many diverse areas, that it is hard to escape the conclusion that something more fundamental is at work here.

There are three quite different policy responses to these failures. First, even more activity and schemes from central government. Second, for government to recognise the limits of central control and management and, third, to look for simpler policies. The choice between these is at the heart of the matter for any progressive government.

The first of these alternatives would be the worst possible response. It would simply guarantee yet more spectacular failures in future. Social democrats need to recognise that the reasons for the recent failures of complex schemes are not confined to the specific design of the schemes themselves. Rather they are a deep and inherent feature of *any* scheme of such complexity

The social democratic model involves active government. An unexpected problem arises. They do all the time, despite every effort to foresee the future. They are what Harold Macmillan described as ‘events, dear boy, events’. The government acts to fix that problem, which may be small. Gradually, these fixes make the whole system more and more complicated, to the point where the risk of a complete collapse, a complete failure, rises sharply.

From a much more abstract perspective, recent advances in the mathematical theory of networks, of how systems or individuals are connected, are suggesting that this is the case. Adding more connections, making the system more complicated, seems to increase the chances of a spectacular, system-wide failure.

The social democracy of the final quarter of the twentieth century, both here and throughout the EU, has become bound up with policies involving greater and greater complications. And with these have come more and more failures. For a long time, the ‘fixes’ worked. But increasingly, as the system becomes more complex, the chances of them so doing falls, and the probability of large, unexpected failure rises.

This is not an argument for Thatcherite *laissez-faire*. Government still has an important role. But it should be as simple as possible. The example of child benefit as a simple, successful policy has already been given. In a completely different area, Ken Livingstone’s congestion charge has been simple and effective. How easy it would have been to assemble an army of expensive graduates in taskforces and multi-

agency liaison to design an elaborate system of exemptions and differential charges. Instead, the exemptions are minimal, the system is simple, the technology has worked, and congestion has fallen. The new initiative on healthy eating in schools involves no fewer than 23 performance standards that a school must satisfy. What a waste of resources is involved in monitoring and inspecting them! Why not simply give this money to the schools to provide better meals and leave it to the common sense of the staff and governors.

Any policy intending to lead to more desirable social outcomes should be judged on this criterion: will money be better spent by simply giving people the money and letting them get on with it? To be sure, if we follow this principle the poor will spend money on things of which the chattering classes disapprove. But some good might come of it. Instead, we have seen £3 billion spent on middle class graduates to administer the Sure Start scheme to no effect at all.

The failure of the much vaunted, detailed and complicated intervention of the Sure Start programme to deliver any benefits to the poor, indeed causing worse outcomes for some of them, symbolises the increasing failure of the social democratic state.

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