

Muddle or Mendacity? The Beveridge Committee and the Poverty Line*

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ABSTRACT

The Beveridge Committee of 1942 is often assumed to have based its proposals for social security scales on a poverty line at the 'human needs' or social participation level. This is because of its 'principle of adequacy of benefit in amount and time'. Using the Committee's working papers, this paper describes the discussions of the committee about the ideas of need and measures of poverty to be used. The evidence shows that the Committee knew very well that its proposed benefit levels were not enough for social participation. Because it consciously implemented the principles of minimum subsistence and less-eligibility in the face of inadequate wages, the proposed scales were arguably more austere even than Rowntree's 'primary poverty' standard which both he and Beveridge acknowledged was not sufficient to meet human social needs. Whether muddle or mendacity, this mystification has had serious consequences for the poor in Britain.

INTRODUCTION

For half a century the social insurance scheme proposed by Sir William Beveridge and his colleagues (1942) has influenced British political thought about social security. It also has had resonance abroad. For more than half that time the poverty lobby in Britain has argued that the means-tested social security benefit scales subsequently introduced were

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too low. Whether they were called National Assistance, Supplementary Benefit or Income Support, they were founded on Beveridge's proposals. As the Chief Economic Adviser to the Department of Health and Social Security put it:

... SB (Supplementary Benefit) scale rates (which) have their origin in the Beveridge budget calculations...Questions about the adequacy of SB scale rates ultimately involve questions about the adequacy of the original Beveridge recommendation and the uprating procedure. (Nicholson, 1975, pp.3-4)

The Beveridge Report was enthusiastically received on publication by a population familiar with the poverty of the inter-war slump. In two sentences which are the subject of this paper the scheme claimed to offer the insured population benefits enough to live on:

The flat rate of benefit proposed is intended in itself to be sufficient without further resources to provide the minimum income needed for subsistence in all normal cases. It gives room and a basis for additional voluntary provision, but does not assume that in any case. (Beveridge, 1942, para.307, p.122)

Some people have taken the phrase 'sufficient without further resources' to mean that the benefits were calculated to be at a level high enough for ordinary people to live and take part in British society at that time. To others, the use of the word 'subsistence' suggests the social inadequacy of the 'merely physical efficiency', primary poverty (P1) calculations of Seebom Rowntree (1901). For decades, British governments have publicly asserted that the subsequent social security scales were 'enough to live on'. But Rowntree himself, together with later empirical work on defining and measuring poverty (Veit-Wilson, 1986a and b; 1987), showed that a participatory lifestyle cannot be afforded on such physical subsistence income levels alone.

So were the members of the Beveridge Committee aware that what they proposed was known to be insufficient for social life? Did they understand the contradiction between the ordinary meanings of 'sufficient without further resources' and of 'subsistence'? Was Sir William Beveridge, in writing paragraph 307 of the Report (quoted above), merely muddled about the two ideas or was he consciously presenting physical subsistence as participatory sufficiency—in which case one might call it mendacious? To seek answers to these questions, I shall review the concepts of poverty and need used by Beveridge and the members of his committee and shall use their detailed working papers to show how they arrived at the conclusions embodied in their report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (Beveridge, 1942).

The issues are important for reasons beyond the political and academic. Beveridge was not the first to want to use estimates of minimum

nutritional needs to construct social security scales: Macnicol mentions a recommendation from the Children's Minimum Council in the 1930s (Macnicol, 1978, p.179). But Beveridge's claims of careful calculation of needs has led to a continuing confusion in both political and academic circles between the prescription of poverty lines and the setting of social security scales (what may be punningly described as the confusion between statistical measures and statutory measures). This has led to the commonplace but fallacious assumption that the social security scales represent a realistic poverty line on which claimants ought to be able to manage to lead a social life if they are competent. Beveridge's assertion of 'adequacy (of the scales)...in all normal cases' (Beveridge, 1942, para.307) has underpinned some efforts to shift blame for inadequacy from the architects of the subsequent schemes to the poor claimants. The topic of the paper thus concerns a continuing cause of human suffering.

The word 'poverty' has, of course, a great many meanings in common use. Originally it meant a visibly squalid lifestyle; later, under the influence of the work of Rowntree (1901; 1937; 1941) the notion of a measurable poverty line came to be taken to mean the lowest cash income at which a defined minimum level of living could be maintained. Argument continues about what that level of living should be: enough for 'merely physical subsistence' (Rowntree, 1901) or for all the 'human needs of labour' as prescribed by experts (Rowntree, 1918; 1937). Or should it be based on empirical studies of what the population itself thinks the minimum standard ought to be (Townsend, 1979; Mack and Lansley, 1985; 1991)? I have discussed these issues elsewhere and the concepts of poverty in this paper are summarised in Note 1 (Veit-Wilson, 1986a and b; 1987; 1989).

Writers on Beveridge have disagreed in their interpretations of the notions of poverty embodied in Beveridge's recommended benefit scales and one aim of this paper is to see what the records themselves suggest. While empirical surveys to discover minimum standards had been carried out in the USA (Gallup, 1966), the respected notions of 'scientific expertise' and nutritional prescription were probably still too firmly embedded in British middle class thought in the 1940s for the empirical approach to be taken seriously by policymakers. Consequently the public argument at that time in Britain was expressed in 'scientific' terms about the contents of the prescribed minimum 'shopping basket': was it to include only the four basic 'physical subsistence' items—food, clothing, fuel and hygiene, and rent—or was it to include some 'social' expenditures for a minimally participatory lifestyle such as Rowntree had tried to calculate in his Human Needs of Labour (HNOL) poverty line?

Some commentators have suggested that in 1942 Beveridge and Rowntree used more generous and participatory approaches to the definition of human needs than implied by the minimum subsistence level of 'primary poverty' (for instance, Harris, 1977, p.394; Briggs, 1961, p.307). Others have observed 'how much less generous the Beveridge subsistence level was than either of the Rowntree studies in setting its minimum level' (Dilnot *et al.*, 1984, p.36; also Field, 1982, pp.121–24). In their discussion of the Beveridge proposals Cutler *et al.* argue that it is misdirected to search for answers:

As an attempt to define an adequate minimum income level, Beveridge's calculation is thoroughly incoherent and unsatisfactory: SIAS never establishes that it is possible to provide realistically for a family on such an income. But to abuse the calculation on this account is to miss the point because the calculation has a political rationale. The procedures of the poverty surveys do not function as a scientific point of departure but as a politically congenial point of support for liberal collectivism. A (scientifically unspecifiable) minimum income level is politically important to SIAS because it defines the target at which state income maintenance should be aimed. (Cutler *et al.*, 1986, pp.11–12)

Nevertheless, even if we agree with these analysts that this was the ideological background, it does not dispose of all the questions. If the minimum *had* to be scientifically unspecifiable, Beveridge clearly chose the wrong discourse: why did he spend so much effort in trying to justify it in scientific terms? Did he have any views about human needs and poverty as such? After all, Rowntree managed to hold such views without having Beveridge's intention of constructing state income maintenance but for Rowntree's contrary purpose of providing a critique of low wages. Questions like these are not answered by ideological generalisations but are central to an understanding of the relationship between people's ideas and the detail of policymaking. In short, to return to the central question: in claiming adequacy for social security scales, was the Beveridge Committee muddled or mendacious?

THE BEVERIDGE COMMITTEE

The history of the Beveridge Committee (the Interdepartmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services, referred to in the government files as the SIC [Social Insurance Committee], IDC or SIAS) has been extensively described before by Beveridge's biographer (Harris, 1977) and many other authors noted below. In April 1941 a proposal was made for an investigation into the workmen's compensation system (as the Royal Commission on that topic, chaired by Sir Hector Hetherington, was to be delayed until the end of the war) and into national health insurance. Other parts of the insurance system were to be included, with a view to removing inconsistencies and gaps and co-ordinating the administration

(PIN8/85, 10 April 1941). A War Cabinet Office (WCO) conference on the topic was held on 16 May under Sir George Chrystal; on 4 June he wrote to government departments to tell them that the chairman was to be Sir William Beveridge and the secretary was to be D.N. Chester, an economist in the WCO (PIN8/85). Harris reported how Beveridge had been at odds with Ernest Bevin in the Ministry of Labour and Bevin was determined to get rid of this irritant; Beveridge was therefore 'kicked upstairs' to chair the SIC (Harris, 1977, p.375). By 26 June the SIC was being referred to as the Beveridge Committee (PIN8/85).

I shall take the details of the history of the Committee as read since this paper is only about an aspect of the work of the SIC which has not had much attention in the literature: the ideas of poverty with which Beveridge (a civil servant at the time) and his group of fellow officials and advisers were working. This lack of attention may be because the topic has never been seen as an important aspect of the work of the SIC. Abel-Smith commented that 'the crucial problem of defining subsistence (was) an aspect which received extremely little public discussion at the time' (Abel-Smith, 1959, p.358). Hennock has shown how versions of Rowntree's primary poverty measure had become used as a yardstick in social surveys up to the war (Hennock, 1987; 1991). The only other available different conception of poverty to challenge it was Rowntree's Human Needs of Labour line (HNOL; Rowntree, 1937), originally a prescription for minimum wages. This paper describes how the SIC chose between the two approaches and why it ended up in 1942 with what Townsend called 'a standard applicable to 1899 and converted by means of a price index based on articles purchased in 1904...as the best method of measuring poverty' (Townsend, 1954, p.131).

It is generally accepted that the progress of the SIC and the production of its report, SIAS, were both driven by Beveridge. Unless there is evidence to the contrary one might not distinguish too finely between his social thought in general and the manifestations in the report of thought about poverty which this paper is about. Writing about the development of Beveridge's social thought, Harris suggested that the conventional image of the report representing 'a synthesis between progressive liberalism and administrative collectivism' is incorrect (Harris, 1982, p.8). She suggested instead that in 1942 Beveridge's conclusions were strongly influenced by the need to satisfy the mainly conservative coalition government and Treasury objectives of post-war economy and by his own firm belief in *homo oeconomicus* whose sole incentives were financial (Harris, 1982, p.11). However, his rationality obliged him to recognise that, if there were a subsistence level implicit in social security benefit levels, this necessi-

tated both minimum wage legislation and family allowances (Harris, 1982, p.12). Further, he saw poverty in terms of normality and economics and not abnormality and behaviour. This allowed him to focus on measures to deal with poverty and incomes rather than with the poor and incompetent (Harris, 1982, p.13).

In 1942 Beveridge was already in his sixties and his ideas had not remained static during his long career in public affairs. Harris suggested that Beveridge's social thought had changed over time and was at times less consistent with any one school of thought than has generally been supposed. Beveridge had first made his name at the beginning of the century as an authority on questions of labour and unemployment but at that time he had somewhat unorthodox ways of expressing his concern. The emphasis on the necessity of work, Beveridge cynically commented in 1905, was 'a conscious device of the upper classes for stimulating industry in the lower classes'. What people really wanted was not regular work but a regular income in order to enjoy the true 'object of life' which was 'not labour but leisure' (quoted in Harris, 1977, p.98). It was an expression of the old saying that one works to live, not lives to work. However incomplete his economic analysis or policy prescriptions, Beveridge's remarks suggested that he held an incipient notion of the goal of the incentive to work and earn as being social participation. He expressed this as 'a regular income' which gives status and security and resources for 'leisure', a concept which is notoriously relative to social position and implies a high level of satisfaction of more immediate needs.

The key issue, then, was whose conception of social participation was to inform policy. The more that middle class people believed in class cultural stratification, the more it seems to have justified their assumptions that subsistence minima were sufficient for the living standards of the working class. However, Harris suggested that Beveridge had a 'peculiar tone-deafness or colour-blindness to questions of social class' and class conflict, particularly through the institutions of the state which she felt he saw as class-neutral (Harris, 1982, p.14). But these views were reflections of a political analysis and not of the social assumptions about the consequent lifestyles of people placed in different economic and cultural circumstances. The political analysis may have had, as it still does, a strongly normative tendency; the social analysis relied on taken-for-granted assumptions about desired lifestyles which are often justified in quasi-empiricist terms. Hence I do not think that Harris's observations about Beveridge's thought, and any conclusions from the evidence about contemporary social thought on cultural stratification, need be in contradiction.

During the period between the wars Beveridge supported the campaign of Eleanor Rathbone's Family Endowment Council for family allowances. Beveridge and Rathbone did not, however, always agree on precise policy proposals. In 1925, for instance, at a time when wage cuts for coal miners were under consideration, Rathbone recommended that both family allowances and minimum wages should be based on Rowntree's HNOL scales which, as Harris commented, were 'considerably more generous than Rowntree's other and more famous scale of subsistence-level poverty' (Harris, 1977, p.344). Beveridge, however, looked to the effects on wage differentials and instead 'proposed that both family allowances and minimum wages should be based on the mean between the two Rowntree scales' (Harris, 1977, p.344). This suggests that at that time Beveridge had either failed to understand the conceptual distinction between the two different scales and saw them as simply two versions of a similar entity or had understood the distinction but was treating the HNOL calculations as if they were not really minima: one could go below them and still prescribe realistic minimum incomes on which people could be expected to live. Whichever it was, Harris wrote, the proposals for state income maintenance in his 1924 pamphlet, *Insurance for All and Everything*, suggested that the nature of subsistence was for him a statistic and not a state of living. Harris noted the several similarities between this pamphlet and the 1942 SIAS report; it is more significant for the topic of this paper than for her book that Beveridge proposed benefits on a similar basis to those of the 1911 insurance acts 'not to meet subsistence needs but merely to act as a threshold for voluntary private saving' (Harris, 1977, p.350). By 1942 he was using the rhetoric of subsistence benefits to be topped up by voluntary saving but these earlier expressions of his ideas may induce scepticism about his understanding of it. Harris's comments suggested that in 1942 he was still confused about the meaning of the concept of subsistence and the uses of measures of it: subsistence was not arbitrary but individuals' needs varied; the administrative definition should take account of social perceptions of need but benefits should be so low as to 'encourage voluntary thrift' (Harris, 1977, p.397).

These, then, are some aspects of Beveridge's previous thoughts about poverty which his biographer noted and which introduce and illuminate the detail of the proceedings of the SIC which follow in the next section. In a review of ideas we are bound to pay more attention to the language than the substance or the practice might justify. The issue for us here is not the few pence more or less difference between one version of the minimum subsistence income scale and another but the ideas of need

which are referred to in the supporting papers as providing the rationale for such differences. Details are thus only referred to when relevant, for it is very easy to become lost in the thicket of cash estimates and statistics in these papers and lose sight of the objective: clarity about the ideas of poverty and need held by Beveridge and the other participants in the process of planning and prescribing the social security system which in principle affected the lives of millions of British people for 40 years.

Harris observed that the proceedings of the SIC were dominated by Beveridge. He and the other members were very busy with other activities at the same time; the meetings were preoccupied with technicalities; the scope and agenda of the enquiry were set by Beveridge to the extent that, as has often been reported, it was he alone who signed the final report (Harris, 1977, pp.385–88). We may therefore take it that where there is no apparent evidence to the contrary in the records, the papers written by Beveridge on the subject are those setting the tone of the discussion and germane to the topic².

WHAT WAS TO BE THE MINIMUM?

The process of enquiry ran intensively from the establishment of the SIC in June 1941. Although the impetus for its work came from what Harris described as the virtual collapse in 1940 of the Royal Commission on Workmen's Compensation (Harris, 1977, pp.382–83), she suggested that the ground had been prepared for a more wide-ranging review of social welfare because of the many existing anomalies: 'In 1941 no less than seven government departments were directly or indirectly concerned with administering cash benefits for different kinds of need' (Harris, 1977, p.378). Further, there was already a view with widespread political support (Harris, 1977, p.380) that the war required action to deal with the evident shortcomings of the existing welfare system and the social needs exposed before the war by the various research studies of poverty (Stevenson, 1977), especially Rowntree's 1936 survey of York (Rowntree, 1941), and during it by the experiences of bombing and evacuation (Titmuss, 1950, quoted by Harris, 1977, p.381). Thus the atmosphere in which the SIC set to work was one expecting government action on poverty by means of standardisation and integration of provision. Reviewing the various background factors Harris concluded:

For the first time for twenty years the relief of poverty from whatever cause rather than relief of unemployment became the major problem and first priority of social administration. (Harris, 1977, p.382)

The question must then be *what poverty was to be relieved?* The first document in the SIC records on the specific topic of 'Subsistence standards

for social insurance benefits' is Beveridge's own memorandum dated 29 December 1941 (BP8/28). But it was not the first to refer to his notions of poverty in discussing the scheme as a whole.

The outline of Beveridge's view of the future social security scheme had already been sketched in a paper a few days earlier (CAB87/76, 11 December 1941). This paper showed how his thinking about the nature of *poverty* was already constrained from the outset by the financial aspects of *social security*. While he asserted that poverty could be abolished by social insurance, the poverty he referred to was the primary poverty used as a measuring device by the inter-war social statisticians' studies. Beveridge demonstrated from the figures given by these various surveys of working class lives and incomes (referred to below) that there was more than enough surplus income within the working class above the 'primary poverty' (P1) line to redistribute it to those below.

Here we see Beveridge's straightforward assumption of the stratification of social burdens as well as of social needs: poverty could be abolished by a redistribution within the working class without affecting the 'wealthier classes'. The abolition of poverty was thus 'within the financial power of the community' (quoted in Harris, 1977, p.393). Beveridge repeated the argument in his paper of 16 January 1942, 'The scale of social insurance benefits and the problem of poverty' (BP8/28 and CAB87/79, SIC[42]3, paras.12–13) and expressed similar ideas in his Report (Beveridge, 1942, paras.14 and 445). Even though Beveridge conceded that redistribution need not be confined to the working class, the comment was not framed in terms of the economics of the class distribution of incomes which might have shown that the middle class was too small and only the working class was large enough to allow sufficient aggregate taxation to be raised for redistribution. Discussing the inadequacy of raising wage rates as a cure for poverty, he remarked:

But the rise of wages that has taken place makes it certain that we are rich enough to abolish poverty if we decide to do so, by a suitable moderate redistribution of income. (SIC[42]3, para.12)

Beveridge's comment thus seems to have epitomised an assumption that his middle class audience might consider the scheme unrealistic if it required redistribution across class boundaries:

It is said simply as the most convincing demonstration that abolition of want just before this war was easily within the economic resources of the community; want was a needless scandal due to not taking the trouble to prevent it. (Beveridge, 1942, para.445)

It was a statement about the use of middle class political power to oblige the working classes ('the community') to support each other. Connoisseurs of political rhetoric will appreciate that the term 'redistribution'

which the liberal Beveridge used neutrally for the horizontal redistribution of social burdens later came to be taken as virtually synonymous with governmentally enforced vertical redistribution and thus a bad word in the vocabulary of the political right.

In these ways Beveridge had indicated his prior belief that poverty meant primary and not secondary poverty even before he came to write explicitly on the measures he proposed to adopt. We cannot tell if he had the belief in P1 first and the financially and socially viable scheme followed from it, or if the desire for economy led him to adopt that conventional minimal idea of poverty which could be accommodated within a viable scheme. We have seen above that he was thinking in terms which suggested confusion between poverty and social security issues even in the 1920s. Would he have been able to achieve the same redistribution had he adopted the HNOL level? Even if the arithmetic suggested he would, Harris's comments imply that Beveridge was also looking for causes of poverty which were insurable categories. The causes of P1 as exposed by Rowntree and others—unemployment, ill-health, old age—fitted this requirement nicely (plus family dependency to be met by family allowances) (Harris, 1977, p.393).

Beveridge's first detailed paper on 'Subsistence standards for social insurance benefits' (BP8/28, 29 December 1941) started by referring to the 'two standards of minimum requirements of income' used by Rowntree in his studies in 1899 and 1936. The way in which Beveridge wrote about these measures makes it appear that he believed that the P1 measure in 1899 could be equated, in terms of its validity as a measure of minimum living income, with the HNOL measure in 1936. This was a mistake about Rowntree's concepts and measures (Veit-Wilson, 1986a and b). Beveridge also misquoted Rowntree's statistics, giving the percentages in poverty by the P1 measure in 1899 and the HNOL measure in 1936 erroneously as those of 'the total population' instead of correctly the working class or wage earning population (29 December 1941, p.1). As he also referred in the same paragraph to the intensity of primary poverty and the average deficiency (the amount by which the actual incomes fell below the calculated poverty line), this fact alone makes the question of what difference it might have made to his scheme's arithmetic if he had taken the HNOL level, even more interesting.

There can be no doubt that Beveridge started his enquiries into the appropriate level at which to set the social security scales with a prejudice in favour of P1 when we read the paragraphs which then follow in same paper on subsistence standards:

The primary poverty line represents the minimum sum on which, according to the state of knowledge in 1899, physical efficiency could be maintained. It was a standard of bare subsistence, rather than living, calculated with the utmost economy. In the estimate of food requirements no account was taken of vitamins which were unknown in 1899 or of the importance of mineral salts which was then not fully recognised.

It will probably be agreed that the primary poverty line, as described by Mr Rowntree, represents the minimum that can be adopted as the basis of social insurance benefits; whether it is an adequate basis depends largely upon consideration of the allowance to be made for improved knowledge of nutrition and the need for vitamins and mineral salts.(BP8/28, 29 December 1941, p.2)

Beveridge went on to point out that the only one of the existing insurance schemes which pre-war paid benefits 'approaching the minimum required for prevention of primary poverty' was unemployment insurance, which paid above the P1 level for families with up to two children.

Apologists for Beveridge might suggest that to set a minimum is by no means to imply the maximum, but his preceding arithmetic of redistribution had already suggested that the two might be the same, and his simultaneous correspondence supports this view. Like the members of the UAB before him in 1934, Beveridge set out to find support for the approach he seemed already to be taking. On the same date as this paper he wrote to Rowntree: 'When you are next in London I would like the chance of lots of talk with you about social insurance and poverty. I have been studying both "Poverty and Progress" and "The Human Needs of Labour" with extreme interest and I hope profit during Christmas'. He asked for Rowntree's views 'on the suitability of taking the primary poverty standard as giving a minimum for social insurance benefits; (and) as to what changes ought to be made in this standard in the light of modern nutritional knowledge'. There were other questions of detail on equivalence issues, concluding: 'I would like your mind on as many of our problems as possible' (SR/B1, 29 December 1941).

Rowntree replied promptly; he had tried to make an appointment to see Beveridge but Beveridge's diary was full for a fortnight. Instead, Rowntree was writing so that Beveridge and he could discuss the contents of the letter when they met. Rowntree wrote that he and his longstanding colleague, F.D. Stuart:

have given a considerable amount of time to a consideration of the important questions which you ask and now make the following recommendation.

We do not think that it would be wise to take the primary poverty standard as giving a minimum for social insurance benefits, but to make adjustments in my human needs figure. (SR/B1, 3 January 1942)

Rowntree explained that 'as the human needs estimate for food requirements was the absolute minimum upon which physical health can

be maintained, we take that as our minimum for social insurance purposes'. They had then cut down the clothing needs by a third, left fuel and lighting as in HNOL and reduced the sundries element from 10s.8d to 2s.4d for a family with three children. This gave a total figure (excluding rent) at 1936 prices of 32s.7d which compared with a P1 level of 30s.7d and an HNOL level of 43s.6d (SR/B1, 3 January 1942; see also Rowntree, 1941, p.102). Rowntree and Stuart concluded that 'we think that 32s.7d is the very lowest minimum that can possibly be defended'.

Rowntree's response to Beveridge's query was thus to propose a minimum which fell far below the HNOL level mainly because of the exclusion of most of the allowances for social expenditures except '1s.0d for sick and burial clubs' (SR/B1, 3 January 1942). The excluded elements were precisely what had made the prescriptive HNOL measure in some sense a plausible social participation minimum. What remained was little more than the asocial P1 measure which even Beveridge had quoted as not being a 'living standard' (BP8/28, 29 December 1941, p.2). There was no indication in the letter why Rowntree had apparently abandoned his previous principled defence of the HNOL standard as the minimum for social life (Rowntree, 1937). In an Assistance Board internal memorandum written later in 1942, Miss Ibberson wrote about Rowntree's new minimum calculations of larger social expenditures for old people:

This is in line with his general argument that human needs cannot in a civilised community today be regarded as confined to the items hitherto constituting the minimum subsistence standards. He has sacrificed this principle in his New Minimum as related to the younger age groups, but retained it substantially in the case of old age pensioners. (AST7/337)

It seems, therefore, that Rowntree was making assumptions about social security requiring less-eligibility for those of working age, a level therefore lower than HNOL.

Although Rowntree wrote on 3 January 1942, Beveridge's reply thanked him for his letter of 9 January. This may be a dating error or imply a letter missing from the file, for it thanked Rowntree for the answers to Beveridge's previous questions. Beveridge replied that 'I had already intended to use your revised subsistence standard which I describe as 'Rowntree New Minimum' as one of the standards to show in the revision of my memorandum, (SR/B1).

In his biography of Rowntree, Briggs reported the exchange of correspondence above in such a way as to leave the impression that Rowntree's recommendation was closer to HNOL than P1 (Briggs, 1961, p.307). Harris, too, reported Beveridge's view that human needs rather than primary poverty should be the basis of social insurance benefits

(Harris, 1977, p.394). The figures and the correspondence suggest a rather different picture. Although this was followed by six months of detailed discussion by a working party of experts, both the concept of poverty and the cash sums at the end were still more akin to P1 than HNOL.

In the meantime, the Secretary of the SIC, D.N. Chester (later Sir Norman Chester, an official in the War Cabinet Office and previously a lecturer in government at Manchester University) (Harris, 1977, p.384) prepared a memorandum for the SIC on 'Fixing Rates of Benefit' (BP8/27, 5 January 1942). He identified two problems. First, there was the question of whether the benefit was to be a contribution towards a loss of income, or instead 'to represent the cost of maintaining a person and his family'. Second, there were all the issues surrounding whether to pay fixed levels irrespective of personal circumstances or discretionary personalised assessments of need, or something in between. He identified many variable factors of equivalence, not merely between persons and dwelling costs but also areas, durations, seasons, earnings (with class and cultural stratification implications) and others. However, his first question is more pertinent to this study. Chester noted that 'if there is no universal system of family allowances even the payment of benefits on subsistence level would be above the lowest level of wages'. Subsistence costs had been worked out by Rowntree and others, and if benefit were higher it would reduce incentives to supplement state provision voluntarily and conflict with wage levels. Thus, Chester continued:

the most generally defensible minimum level of benefit would be subsistence less a deduction for expenditure not incurred during unemployment. If this standard is attacked for being too low, it would raise the much wider question of minimum wages and the raising of the standard of living of the working classes. (BP8/27, 5 January 1941, p.1)

To suggest that there could be such a level as 'subsistence less expenses in work' seems inconsistent with Rowntree's definition of minimum subsistence as already excluding expenses in work. Chester may not have been referring to this but to the discussions of the benefit scales in the 1930s which had included the question of whether the calorie needs of unemployed men who were expected to get around looking for work were comparable with those in work; if not, their subsistence costs could be even lower than P1 calculated for those in work (AST12/2, 30 August 1934). Beveridge referred to this issue as 'subsistence needs of a person not working are less than those of a person working...because when idle he needs less food, and less travelling to and from work and probably does not wear out his clothes as much' (SIC[42]3, para.20).

Beveridge presented his memorandum on 'The Scale of Social Insurance

Benefits and the Problem of Poverty' (SIC[42]3) to the SIC on 16 January 1942. It was arguably a manifesto of his views. Even though there was still more activity after this time to examine the precise implications of the use of the subsistence concept, most of what finally emerged in the Report can be read here (Harris, 1977, p.394). First, Beveridge reiterated an earlier SIC memorandum on the purpose of social insurance:

to ensure for everyone income up to subsistence level in return for compulsory contributions, expecting him to make voluntary provision to ensure income that he desires beyond this...It implies that the benefits provided by the State...should by themselves, without any addition made through voluntary insurance, be sufficient for subsistence; it requires the fixing of benefit scales, not arbitrarily, but by reference to reasoned estimates of the cost of providing housing, food, clothing, fuel and other necessities...The principle...assumes that...no lesser aim should be admitted than the total abolition of that part of poverty which is due to interruption or loss of earning power. (SIC[42]3, 16 January 1942, para.1)

Three issues in this statement deserve note. First, the use of the term *subsistence*, which constantly returns throughout the SIC discussions and in the Beveridge Report to indicate primary poverty rather than the HNOL participatory poverty line. Second, the reference to the four basic elements of P1 subsistence (food, clothing, fuel/hygiene and housing) 'and other necessities' which were the 'margin for wastage' or 'personal sundries' used by the various social surveys Beveridge quoted in the following paragraphs. Third, the reference to the 'total abolition of that part of poverty' meant not that part of an individual's or family's poverty caused by unemployment or ill-health but of the totality of poverty in Britain. Beveridge's equation of the asocial P1 subsistence minimum with poverty as a whole is clear, probably more out of simple unconsciousness of the problematic issues this study deals with than dissimulation.

The memorandum went on to review the evidence of poverty in Britain from the studies conducted in East London (1928–29; Llewellyn Smith, 1934), Liverpool (1930; Caradog Jones, 1934), Sheffield (1931; Owen, 1933), Plymouth (undated and no author given, 1935), Southampton (1931; Ford, 1936), York (1936; Rowntree, 1941) and Bristol (1937; Tout, 1938). In each case, Beveridge asserted, the measure of poverty taken was subsistence, covering the four basic elements alone, except in Rowntree's case, where the HNOL measure was higher than those of the other authors because it included social expenditures. Beveridge referred to R.F. George's 'New Calculation of the Poverty Line' (George, 1937) and to other recent reports on nutritional needs, from the Ministry of Health in 1931, the BMA in 1933, and the League of Nations Health Committee's Technical Commission on Nutrition in 1936 ('but this is concerned with the optimum rather than the minimum dietary'). He thus noted fairly

comprehensively the relevant standards of the time. Beveridge asserted that the studies provided guidance on 'the scale of benefits required to secure the minimum of subsistence' and he devoted a paragraph to considering 'The Validity of Subsistence Standards':

It remains true that the standards of subsistence used in the social surveys are based on deliberate scientific pronouncements as to minima required for health, particularly in the field of nutrition; most of the recent surveys adopt either the report of the BMA Committee of (sic) Nutrition of 1933 or some variant of it suggested by later researches. No scientific support can be counted on for undercutting these minima. That is to say it is not possible to make a reasoned defence of providing benefits below these minima, except on the view that compulsory state insurance should be limited to making a contribution towards subsistence and that voluntary insurance or personal resources should be trusted to fill the gap. (SIC[42]3, para.4)

The remainder of the memorandum was largely taken up with a section on 'Benefit according to Need'. This was a detailed consideration of the figures for benefit level suggested by three of the authors who had produced estimates of subsistence quoted before: Rowntree's New Minimum (the slightly uprated P1); R.F. George; and H. Tout (described as Bristol, the location of the study published in 1938). Beveridge noted that:

The 'Rowntree New Minimum' is based on a revised calculation furnished by Mr Rowntree, corresponding to the 'human needs' standard in respect of food, fuel and lighting but reducing the allowances in that standard for clothing and household and personal sundries. (SIC[42]3, para.17)

But these were precisely the elements which distinguished the asocial physical approaches to subsistence from the social approaches to a prescriptive poverty line. The George and Bristol standards were for 'bare subsistence only'. The Bristol survey standard was described as following George and being 'very nearly equal to it' (Tout, 1938, p.16n).

The comparative figures Beveridge quoted were as follows for a couple with three children aged four, eight and 11 (excluding the 10 shillings standard rent which Beveridge included):

	Shillings/Pence
Rowntree New Minimum	31s.7d
George	35s.3d
Bristol	37s.8d

Beveridge also showed the benefit levels for Unemployment Insurance in 1940 (31s.0d) and the benefit level he had already proposed in an earlier memorandum to the SIC (SIC[41]20) (35s.0d). When one compares all these levels with Rowntree's irreducible HNOL level for social life (43s.6d) the conclusion is unavoidable: Beveridge was not working with a 'human needs' approach to constructing benefit levels to live on but with a version of the asocial primary poverty approach.

Why Beveridge did this is the puzzle suggested by the title of this paper. In 1899 Rowntree had devised the P1 measure simply as a heuristic device to convince people who would accept definitions of poverty in terms only of the irreducible scientific minimum of physiological, but not social, needs (Rowntree, 1903). While Bowley and the other social researchers cited above had subsequently used versions of Rowntree's objective P1 line simply as a measure to establish the extent of that kind of subsistence poverty, Beveridge was now deliberately using it as a prescription for minimum living incomes, a purpose which Rowntree, its original author, had explicitly rejected (see Veit-Wilson, 1986a and b). But Beveridge knew this. He had written in the same memorandum: 'The standard of minimum subsistence adopted by Mr Rowntree in 1899 was rejected by him a generation later as too low, and would be rejected decisively by public opinion today' (SIC[42]3, para.6). It was this remark which contributed to Harris's conclusion that Beveridge proposed to adopt a higher level of subsistence based on 'human needs' (Harris, 1977, p.394). However, the evidence of the arguments Beveridge put forward in this memorandum, as well as the subsequent proceedings of the working group on subsistence, suggest that he and his colleagues did not follow public opinion and 'reject decisively' the P1 subsistence standards. Instead, it seems that they were swayed by their views on less-eligibility and aggregate cost into justifying social security benefit levels in terms of merely physical subsistence needs, with no more than the barest margin for wastage and sundries.

Thus the approach to setting social security benefit scales which the Beveridge Committee considered and used from start to finish was indistinguishable in principle and, as I shall show below, in composition, from the primary poverty measures described by Rowntree in 1899. As such, the scales represented not a *living* income but a state contribution towards one which recipients would have had to supplement in other ways if they wished to live social lives. This was precisely the opposite of what Beveridge had argued was now required and was, in my view, incompatible with his implication of the unsupplemented adequacy of the proposed scales. But as Beveridge himself wrote in the same memorandum: a 'difficulty of adequate benefit is the possible effect on the readiness of recipients to take employment in preference to benefit' (SIC[42]3, para.28).

Beveridge's memorandum suggested to the SIC that further enquiries be carried out. They included studies of the adequacy of food consumed by the working class as shown in family budgets, studies into 'minimum standards of nutrition adopted by various authorities, with a view to

establishing an authoritative and accepted standard for determination of subsistence incomes' and studies of regional differences in rents and family budgets (SIC[42]3, para.32). A further memorandum: 'Some Principal Questions' queried if benefits should be earnings-related or flat rate and, if the latter, if they should 'seek to provide a subsistence minimum or...aim at providing part only, leaving the balance to be provided by voluntary insurance or from other sources, (T230/104). The SIC referred these matters of subsistence to a sub-committee for consideration (Harris, 1977, p.398). The next section deals with its deliberations.

THE SUBSISTENCE SUB-COMMITTEE

The members of the Subsistence Sub-Committee (SSC) were named in the SIAS report as 'including Professor A.L. Bowley, Mr Seebohm Rowntree, Mr R.F. George and Dr H.E. Magee' (Beveridge, 1942, para.196). It was set up following the meeting of the SIC on 21 January 1942, and Harris noted that it was to have contained a doctor and nutritionist from the BMA (Harris, 1977, p.398, quoting SIC minutes of 21 January 1942, CAB87/77). In the event, apart from the involvement of Bowley, Rowntree and George—the three most eminent authors on poverty lines available—the people who contributed papers and took part in discussion consisted of the Secretary of the Assistance Board, Sir George Reid, and two officials from the Ministry of Health, Dr H.E. Magee and E.R. Bransby. According to Miss Ibberson, an official in the AB, Dr Magee 'appears to be a nutrition specialist' and Bransby was 'another dietician on the Ministry's staff' (AST7/337, she called him Dr Bransby but he is shown as plain 'Mr' on a joint paper which he wrote with Dr Magee (BP8/28, 31 March 1942). A memorandum, 'Notes on Future Procedure', from Chester to Beveridge at the end of February 1942 had suggested that the subsistence basis of the benefit levels should be discussed 'by a group containing Reid, Epps and Hale (and possibly Mrs Hamilton)' with Miss Soutar as Secretary, who were members of the SIC, to which others such as Rowntree, George and Magee could be invited as 'technical assessors' to help to examine witnesses such as Sir John Boyd Orr and someone from the BMA (BP8/27). The minutes of 'A meeting on levels of subsistences' (sic) held on 26 May 1942 also referred to Mr rather than Dr E.R. Bransby and mentioned several other members of the full SIC as present (T230/104). Beveridge's prefatory note to his memorandum to SIC on 'Benefit Rates and Subsistence Needs' of 29 May 1942 stated that 'the question of the level at which benefit rates of the Social Security Scheme should be fixed with a view to meeting minimum subsistence needs has been under consideration by a sub-committee' including Bowley, Rowntree,

Magee, George and Reid (BP8/28, SIC[42]55). It seems, therefore, that the membership may have been treated as rather fluid and membership ascribed to officials on a rather *ad hoc* basis.

The questions with which the SSC was concerned were not abstract or theoretical. The members were not interested in further discussion of the difference between P1 and HNOL, as the decision had already been taken to adopt the guiding principle of 'subsistence' as the basis of the social security scales. In the vocabulary of the Committee, subsistence unequivocally meant nothing more than the costs of the four basics: food, clothing, fuel/hygiene, and rent, plus the margin for wastage. This definition excluded allowances for the costs of social participation. At a meeting held on 13 March (attended by Beveridge and Chester, Bowley, George, Rowntree and Stuart, Magee and two other officials) it was agreed that Rowntree and Stuart, George and Magee were to 'prepare statements on a standard of subsistence on the following basis...(3) the standard should be a Spartan minimum, making no allowance for human imperfection' (BP8/28, 13 March 1942). Beveridge's biographer, José Harris, wrote to me: 'Sir Norman Chester, with whom I discussed this question (Beveridge's thought on poverty) at length, constantly emphasised to me how limited the definition of poverty was deliberately meant to be' (personal letter, 1 June 1988). As Rowntree put it in a note to Beveridge, 'I gather that your objective is to provide social insurance which will guarantee an income sufficient to provide the minimum needs of physical efficiency for everyone' (SR/B5a, 1 July 1942).

We have already seen that for Beveridge 'physical efficiency' was synonymous with P1 and 'subsistence'. If human imperfection were excluded, there can be no doubt that he did not aim for the state to provide an income like HNOL on which the life of ordinary imperfect humans could be pursued on a participatory basis. If this continues to be a contentious assertion, consider the fact that Rowntree emphasised the distinction very positively in the following extract from 'The Human Needs of Labour' (Rowntree, 1937, pp.159–60) which he supplied to the SSC as page 4 of his memorandum on the 'Calculation of the Poverty Line':

In the inquiry dealt with in (HNOL), I am seeking to establish a minimum standard of living. *I do not mean a minimum for subsistence*, for my standard takes account of national customs, such as the eating of meat, and allows a slender margin for expenditure not absolutely essential for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency. I have sought to establish, and to show the cost of, a standard of living below which no section of the community should be compelled to live (BP8/28, Rowntree, undated, March 1942, p.4; underlinings in original but emphasis added).

Rowntree went on to compare his HNOL level with the League of Nations

standards for food. These were optimal (no marginal addition could improve health) rather than minimal ('a minimum diet will suffice to prevent definite diseases due to malnutrition, (but) it is not sufficiently liberal to provide for perfect health'). He explained why he had not adopted the LoN standard for food in his HNOL poverty line:

If I had adopted for diet a standard so high that no alteration in it could improve health, I should, to be logical, have had to adopt a similar standard for housing, holidays, recreation, means of transport to and from work, indeed for every item of expenditure. This would have involved a cost of living figure so high that it would be regarded as Utopian and its adoption as outside the realms of practical politics. (Ibid. p.4, original underlining)

The evidence that Rowntree was fully conscious of the need to work in the realm of practical politics is found earlier in the same memorandum, where he gave another explanation of his reasons for not adopting the dietary recommendations of the LoN:

In arriving at the amount of benefit to be paid to unemployed persons it would in our opinion be unjustifiable to allow for a dietary more costly than can be afforded by a large proportion of working class families when the chief wage earner is in work. (ibid. p.2)

This is a clear exposition of the principle of less-eligibility and was appropriate to the Committee's task in hand which was the design of social security scales. Rowntree had not used the principle of less-eligibility in designing the HNOL standard precisely because the HNOL standard was a prescription for a minimum living wage with the role of exposing the inadequacy of existing low wage rates. In the same memorandum on setting social security scales, he emphasised this critical distinction by quoting himself on the topic of setting the HNOL line:

Throughout my enquiry (into the HNOL poverty line), I have sought to adopt such conservative figures that no impartial reader could maintain that my standard was extravagant. I know that this lays me open to criticism that it is too low, and I admit that I should find it easier to defend the case for raising than for lowering it. But having my special purpose in view, I find it easier still to defend the standard I have prescribed. To say this is not to criticise the dietary standard laid down by the League's Technical Commission. On the contrary, I regard it as most important that ideals should be placed before us, not only for the people's food, but for all the different factors which affect the standard of life. (Ibid., p.4)

Rowntree showed the members of the SSC very clearly here that the factors which affected the setting of the HNOL poverty line, and which made it arguably irreducible, were not operative in setting the social security scales which had to be lower. The two tasks were entirely distinct. Rowntree realised this, as presumably his contemporary audience did, but it is not clear if subsequent commentators who often confuse the two have done so.

Reid's contribution to the deliberations of the SSC was a memorandum

on 'The Subsistence Level' (BP8/37, 20 February 1942). Lynes (1977, p.43) has remarked that the Beveridge Report's phrasing: '...determination of what is required for reasonable human subsistence is to some extent a matter of judgement; estimates on this point change with time, and generally, in a progressive community, change upwards' (Beveridge, 1942, para.27) may have been influenced by Reid, as it showed some similarities to an earlier memorandum to the nascent Unemployment Assistance Board in 1934 (AST12/2, 19 July 1934) which he had probably written. Reid was already an Assistant Secretary of the UAB in 1934 and thus deeply involved in the plans for the new scales. The basis for his 1942 memorandum was the UAB Memorandum on 'A "scientific basis" for the assessment of needs' (AST12/2, 30 August 1934) which he had written. This paper was designed as a rationalisation after the scales had been set on explicitly less-eligibility principles. As the minutes of the sixth meeting of the UAB very frankly put it:

As has been indicated in Mr Reid's memorandum, there was no scientific standard for the calculation of all the needs to be covered by the Board; the matter was one of social convention and expediency. The Office had therefore proceeded on the principle of less-eligibility; they had tried to produce a scale under which, for the ordinary family of man, wife and 3 children who had no resources, the allowance would be below net wages without having to call into operation the wage stop clause. They had distributed the resulting figure among the components of the household in the way which seemed to them to reflect the realities of household economy. (VM6/1, 13 September 1934, p.3)

Now, only eight years later, Reid was to review much the same material and come to much the same conclusion. He held the BMA nutritional prescriptions as still valid, and while George and Rowntree had produced new versions of poverty lines, he treated them as secondary to the quasi-scientific primary status of nutrition. Rather than quote Reid's ritual obeisance to social relativity, it is more illuminating to consider the comments which indicate the political realities as he saw them. People will spend whatever money they have according to their own priorities whatever is laid down. They 'will stint themselves in the essentials of life in order to enjoy some of its amenities'. All standards are arbitrary; none is scientifically defensible; even 'the cost of food will amount to little, if anything, more than half the total cost of subsistence'. In short, Reid concludes:

All that can be done is to bring together the proposals made by different persons who have studied the subject and to consider to what extent such proposals have a reasonable backing of authority, *and whether they are appropriate to the purpose immediately in view.* (BP8/37, 20 February 1942, para 3; emphasis added).

The 'immediate purpose' of the SSC was not to find a poverty line but,

using the discourse of subsistence, to construct a politically defensible basis for a social security scale. Chester put the matter very clearly in a draft paper reviewing the arithmetic of the proposals made by members of the SSC: the addition came to a figure which:

is the rate of benefit at present ruling under unemployment insurance. That is to say it looks as if we should get to a defensible general level of benefits by adjusting the present rates of unemployment benefit for any change in cost of living as between 1937/38 and post-war. Such a benefit, however, would...(c) not, perhaps, allow a margin for domestic inefficiency. (T230/104, 20 April 1942, p.2)

We could spend much time in examining the details of the various surveys and prescriptions quoted by Reid and others but without advancing our understanding of the overall level. As we have seen, the UAB had treated the details as sections to be painted in after the overall dimensions of the frame were fixed. There is no evidence that the SSC took a different line. The work of the SSC was an exercise in rehearsing the rhetoric of subsistence, so that the proposals would be politically unassailable. In that sense, the role of its prescriptions was similar to Rowntree's original heuristic aim in devising the concept of primary poverty. As Cutler, Williams and Williams (1986) have pointed out at length, for the SIC the aim was not to describe the minimum income needed for living but, by using the language of scientific rationality in setting social security scales, to divert discussion away from the conflict between social needs and political power.

The issues of equivalence scales and the treatment of rent (over which the members of the SSC, especially Rowntree, got so heated), are thus not essential to this project's exploration of concepts of poverty. However, what is pertinent to the issue of concepts is to see how far the composition of the various prescriptions for subsistence more closely resembled P1 or HNOL. By considering the proportion of prescribed expenditure to be devoted to food, the next section uses the method suggested by the economist, Ernst Engel, to examine this.

THE ENGEL APPROACH TO MEASURING LIVING STANDARDS

Ernst Engel observed that 'the proportion of the outgo used for food, other things being equal, is the best measure of the material standard of living of a population' (Wynn, 1970, p.41, n.2, as quoted in translation) and that as income rises the proportion spent on 'subsistence' declines and on 'sundries' increases (Bliss and Binder, 1908, p.456). If we accept these principles, we can compare the empirical findings and the prescriptions considered by the SSC and embodied in the SIAS report, to draw conclusions about the relative standards of living each implied.

In 1937–38 the Ministry of Labour carried out the first national survey of working class expenditure patterns since the only previous official British survey, which had been carried out by the Board of Trade in 1904. The first study had analysed a sample (not random) of nearly 2,000 urban working class family budgets. It was used from 1914 onwards as the basis for the weights attached to indices of percentage changes in the cost of the five main groups of items in the working class domestic cost of living: food, clothing, fuel and light, rent and ‘miscellaneous’.

The survey in 1937–38 was mainly based on a random sample of around 9,000 insured workers (AST7/861, 1947). As a proportion of expenditure excluding (or including) rent, food had constituted about 71 (60) per cent of the Cost of Living Index weights in 1914, adjusted to 64 (53.2) per cent at the outbreak of the Second World War. However, the 1938 empirical findings on average working class domestic expenditure suggested that the proportion actually spent on food was only 46 (40.1) per cent (AST7/861, 13 November 1946, para.10).

This actual figure of 46 per cent of income for working class spending on food in 1938 compares with Rowntree’s 1937 HNOL figure of 47 per cent. This suggests that in the mid-1930s the prescriptive minimum of HNOL may not have been far from the average working class level of living. Victor George calculated that the HNOL poverty line was 84 per cent of the average earnings of male manual workers in 1936 (George, 1973, p.47). At any rate, it fits with Rowntree’s own finding that nearly one third of working class families in York fell below the poverty line (Rowntree, 1941, p.32) based on the HNOL prescription for a working man with a wife and three children. If the man were unemployed, Rowntree deducted social expenditures from the HNOL level and the Engel figure became 51 per cent. By contrast, Rowntree’s primary poverty line gave a figure of 63 per cent while his New Minimum in 1942 was similarly 63 per cent. Table 1 shows the principal figures.

The table shows that the figures which Beveridge proposed gave a higher Engel proportion than any of Rowntree’s, which implies a lower level of living. Beveridge’s figures were exceeded only by R.F. George’s 1937 calculations. Yet R.F. George had compared the prescriptions of Bowley and Hogg (1925), Llewellyn Smith (1934), Caradog Jones (1934), Ford (1936) and Owen (1933) for their various studies of poverty in English towns in the 1920s and 1930s. He concluded that all their allowances for food and fuel were too small and that ‘the minimum needs standards should be significantly higher than those hitherto accepted, with the result that the extent of absolute poverty has been underestimated’ (George, 1937, p.92). ‘Absolute poverty’ was the term George used

TABLE 1. *Minimum subsistence Engel proportions (proportion of total expenditure to be spent on food, in each case for a couple with three children, excluding rent, at 1938 prices, in shillings and pence)*

<i>Prescriptive subsistence level</i>	<i>Food (s/d)</i>	<i>Total (s/d)</i>	<i>Engel (%)</i>
George 1937 ¹	28/9	36/10	78
Beveridge 1942			
Couple ²	13/-	22/-	59
Child ³	5/11	17/-	84
Couple + 3 children	30/9	43/-	72
Rowntree 1936			
Primary poverty ⁴	19/5	30/7	63
Rowntree 1942			
New minimum ⁵	20/6	32/7	63
Rowntree 1941			
HNOL for unemployed ⁶	20/6	40/5	51
Rowntree 1937			
HNOL ⁷	20/6	43/6	47
<i>For comparison</i>			
[1] Average actual; working class domestic expenditure ⁸			
Board of Trade Survey 1904, with 1914 weights			71
Ministry of Labour Survey 1937/38			46
[2] National Assistance Board scale rate for couple, 1948 ⁹			55
[3] Actual long-term unemployed families with dependent children, 1978/79 Family Finances Survey ¹⁰			43
[4] Average British households, 1986 Family Expenditure Survey ¹¹			24

¹ George, 1937, p.90; calculated for three children aged 6–14.

² Note of a meeting on levels of subsistences 26 May 1942, T230/104; SIC[42]55, 29 May 1942, p. 2, CAB87/79 and BP8/28; Beveridge, 1942, para. 222.

³ SIC[42]133, 14 August 1942, para. 39, CAB87/82 and BP8/28; Beveridge, 1942, para. 228.

⁴ Rowntree, 1941, p. 102.

⁵ Rowntree to Beveridge, 3 January 1942, p. 2, SR/B1.

⁶ Rowntree, 1941, p. 30, n. 2.

⁷ Rowntree, 1941, p. 28.

⁸ Cabinet Official Steering Committee on Economic Development, Paper ED[46]37, para. 10, 13 November 1946, AST7/861.

⁹ Bullard [National Assistance Board] to Professor Brinley Thomas, 2 March 1950, AST7/1199. This proportion [22 shillings out of 40 shillings] is also found in a note on AST 7/931 in Bullard's handwriting but unsigned and undated, around 1948, but another note by Bullard on AST7/1199, undated, gives only 50% [20s out of 40s].

¹⁰ As quoted by Cooke and Baldwin, 1984, p. 46.

¹¹ Department of Employment, 1988.

for the social survey measure which in essence was no more than Rowntree's P1 with small amendments. It consisted of the minimum subsistence basic items giving allowances for food, clothing, fuel and hygiene, and rent. For a two child family and excluding rent, the Engel proportions for these five previous studies all fell between 65 and 74 per cent, while George's was 77 per cent (George, 1937, p.91; children aged 10 and four). We might therefore not agree that his standard of living was higher, even if the cash sum was.

The critical issue in these comparisons was the allowance within them for food, and most of the Beveridge Subsistence Sub-Committee discussion of adequacy revolved around the precise calculation of calories and the available foodstuffs in which they might be found at the cheapest cost. But given that real people spent their money in other ways, these very lengthy and extremely detailed and involved arguments have something of the flavour of the metaphysical in them: calories per penny was not far from angels and pinheads. George had taken higher dietary standards and costs than those statisticians who carried out social surveys in the 1920s and 1930s and who were concerned not with finding a prescription for minimum living levels but with measuring the extent of P1. It may not have mattered to them if the diet was nutritionally adequate as long as they had an irreducible standard measure. George's paper was written to make the point that if the standard were too low, the scale of poverty would have been underestimated. He, too, seems to have moved from promoting his new measure for research purposes, to seeing it as a guide to social security scale construction—perhaps because he had taken the trouble to investigate nutritional needs.

But the more that the food element was increased in composition and cost, the more pressure it put on the remainder of the family budget constrained by less-eligibility. Rowntree but also Bowley (T230/104), not only George (BP8/28, 30 March 1942) and Magee and Bransby (BP8/28, 31 March 1942) submitted papers on nutrition to the SSC. Chester summarised the various proposals in a draft paper of 20 April (BP8/28, 20 April 1942) and a fuller paper following the meeting at which it was discussed on 21 April (BP8/28, 21 April 1942). The 'norm' for discussion was not the scale for a couple with three children used by Rowntree as a base for HNOL (which I have therefore used for comparisons above) but simply the scales for working-age adults. The reason was that Beveridge presupposed that family allowances paid irrespective of the parents' employment status would cover the subsistence costs of each child:

Assuming that children are provided for by a general system of children's allowances, the main scales to be considered are those for a man and his dependent wife, for a man alone, and for a woman alone taken as of working age in all cases (omitting for a moment the pensioners). (BP8/28, 21 April 1942)

There was agreement that 13 shillings for a couple would cover the BMA or LoN dietaries, differently composed but costing about the same. Clothing was taken as three shillings to 'cover the Rowntree standard'. Rowntree's New Minimum had in fact suggested 3s.2d (SR/B1, 3 January 1942) but Chester's draft of 20 April states, 'for clothing Rowntree suggests 3s.0d rising to 4s.0d after 13 weeks' (BP8/28). Rent was taken

as 10 shillings and further information was to be collected on this and the fuel elements of subsistence, for which Rowntree had suggested 4s.4d. These subsistence items totalled 30s.4d. The paragraph which disposes of the social issues deserves quotation:

There remains the question of whether any allowance should be made for inefficiency and whether such an allowance should be made on the whole budget or on a part of it only. Failure to reach the minimum standard with the money allowed may be due either to faulty buying of the items included in the standard, e.g. the buying of expensive processed foods rather than cheap plain foods, or spending on extraneous items, e.g. seats at the cinema. It seems to be generally agreed that while some allowance for the former type may be justified, no allowance for the latter need be made. (BP8/28, 21 April 1942)

It is a typical example of the muddled 'package deal' thinking (Fox, 1979) often found in these papers, conflating values, facts and strategies. The 'justification' was of course to the political audience of the report; it did not necessarily mean that poor people might not be justified in social spending. As the liberal Beveridge himself pointed out to Rowntree, 'freedom to spend is part of essential freedom' (SR/B6, 18 August 1942; and see below).

A further problem was that if the concept of subsistence were applied consistently, it meant that every individual's separate needs must be separately calculated and allowed for. Otherwise some might get too much and others too little. Rowntree wrote to Beveridge:

You have gone to immense pains to arrive at the cost of living. The subcommittee has discussed at considerable length whether certain items should be 6d or 1s.0d more or less. But if a flat rate for rent is adopted it will be wrong in almost every case, because the number of people paying exactly 10s. is insignificant. (SR/B5a, 1 July 1942)

Bowley had also commented that 'in some respects the scales suggested are discrepant from those based on minimum needs' because of the variation of rents (SR/B5b, 17 June 1942). Rowntree continued to harass Beveridge with such comments until well after the report was published. There seems to have been some unconscious inconsistency in comments such as these, whether raised as problems of equivalence scales or of the failure to provide precisely for subsistence, when one considers that all the allowances for personal needs were based on assumptions about average needs for food, clothing and heating, as well as for rent.

There was a great deal of discussion in the SSC on the equivalent requirements of men and women, older and younger people, and children of various ages, both in terms of the composition and cost of dietaries, and their needs for clothing and their relative proportional or marginal demands on the household's expenditure on heating, lighting and hygiene. However, the issues of equivalence or the costs of children as

such have been discussed thoroughly elsewhere (for example by Bradshaw, 1988, or Field, 1985) and are not directly germane to the focus on concepts of need in themselves.

The relative costs of children which the SSC considered did, however, have significant consequences for their arithmetical calculations of the total minimum income for families with children. Field pointed out that while the Beveridge rates for a single person were two thirds or less than Rowntree's HNOL scale, Beveridge's allowances for children were 'substantially more generous than Rowntree's although it is questionable if Beveridge's relativities could be defended by the state of knowledge then, let alone now' (Field, 1985, p.19. Note that Macnicol shows that they were, however, considerably less than the 14 shillings a week cost of maintaining a child suggested by the nutritionist Boyd Orr: Macnicol, 1978, p.196). As a result, there was a superficial resemblance between the prescribed sums (Rowntree's HNOL 43s.6d and Beveridge's 43s.0d) for a couple with three children, a similarity which led Harris to suggest that Beveridge had shifted to the HNOL approach (Harris, 1977, p.394, and personal letter, 1 June 1988).

However, as these proposals for a three-child family income out of work also presupposed the payment of two family allowances to those in work, the figures cannot be used in a less-eligibility comparison with unsupplemented wage rates. Macnicol has shown how important the less-eligibility principle was in making family allowance policy (1978). The appropriate figure for comparison would be the scales for a couple with one child. As Beveridge put it, 'very few men's wages are insufficient to cover at least two adults and one child' (1942, para 417). But what is more to the point here is the much higher proportion of food costs in the Beveridge scale for a child compared with the adults¹. Had the child's subsistence costs or family allowance been calculated on a more empirical basis, it would have included a larger sum for non-food costs (see Field, 1985, chapter 3) and the Engel proportion for the family would have been reduced.

Beveridge answered the question of how large were to be the margins over the basic subsistence elements by the simple proposal of 1s.8d for a couple (1s.0d for a single person), at the meeting of the SSC on 26 May (T230/104, 26 May 1942). In essence this meeting adopted the figures which became the basis of the final report, although the figures themselves, which had always been discussed in terms of 1937-38 prices, were uprated for inflation. Field commented about the public reaction when the report was published:

One is left wondering whether there would have been such enthusiasm if the unsuspecting public had been aware of just how much less generous for many claimants the proposed minimum income levels were compared with Rowntree's 1936 (HNOL) standard; or had it been known at the time that the revision of Beveridge's rates would not take the war-time inflation fully into account. (Field, 1985, pp.19–20)

The proposed rates were embodied in the paper SIC[42]55 on 'Benefit Rates and Subsistence Needs' in which Beveridge reported on the SSC to the full SIC at the end of May (BP8/28, 28 May 1942). Beveridge posed various questions about the treatment of rent, equivalences and other details and the SSC members produced further responses, but they add nothing to our understanding of the basis of the scheme. A revised version of the paper, now entitled SIC[42]133, 'Subsistence Needs and Benefit Rates', was issued on 14 August (BP8/28, 14 August 1942) and probably represents the last word on the topic before the publication of the report itself. There were minor changes in detail, such as that the 32s.0d allowance for a couple was now allocated four shillings to fuel and sundries and two shillings to 'margin' for wastage (SIC[42]133, para.32) but as Beveridge wearily remarked in a reply to one of Rowntree's lengthy and detailed harangues about variable rents and the precise allocation of subsistence scales:

The difficulty is that it is of the essence of insurance benefit that being given as of right it should not take too detailed account of how individuals spend their income. Freedom to spend is part of essential freedom. (SR/B6, 18 August 1942)

We must also note Beveridge's earlier emphatic remark that 'no very exact standard can be laid down. In the report of the Committee, figures of expenditure on food, clothes, rent, etc, will be quoted merely as an illustration of the way in which benefit may be spent' (T230/104, 26 May 1942; underlining in original). Given this view of the problem of allocating expenditure within the benefit levels required for less-eligibility, it is hardly an exaggeration to claim that the whole SSC exercise of calculating allocatable needs was simply to provide a publishable rationalisation. This claim is supported by the public assertions by officials, long before and after the report, that no precise allocation of the social security scales was possible—which did not, of course, stop them from doing so privately for internal departmental reasons (see, for instance, the memoranda by J.E. Bullard, an official in the NAB, on AST7/931 and AST7/1199, 1948–50, mentioned above in footnote 9 to Table 1). The issue in constructing social security scales was really (as Cutler and his colleagues pointed out: 1986, pp.11–12, quoted above) to rationalise and justify the decision to take a level based on less-eligibility and make it seem 'sufficient' in terms of the widely plausible discourses

of abstracted nutritional science and prescriptive poverty studies.

CONCLUSION

Much of the debate on Beveridge and welfare reform has taken place around the issues of his intellectual consistency and the political intentions of both himself and contemporary bureaucrats. This debate is misplaced insofar as it assumes a direct correspondence between his views and organised interests within the state and in capitalist society. It is more realistic to recognise the diversity of Beveridge's ideas and his constitutional conservatism. The important issue is not his intentions but the practical implications of his proposals. (Melling, 1991, p.78)

If Rowntree's HNOL poverty line, his prescription for minimum wages, is any yardstick, Beveridge's benefit scales for social security were known then to be inadequate as subsequent calculations suggest, and this had practical implications. Dilnot and his colleagues calculated that 'the Beveridge "poverty line" was only about two-thirds that of Rowntree's' because it omitted the social items of expenditure (Dilnot *et al.*, 1984, p.36). Lynes reported 30 years ago that the basic National Assistance rate in 1948 for a family 'would probably have been below the poverty line established by Rowntree' in 1936, allowing for price changes (Lynes, 1962, p.45). The Assistance Board itself admitted (but only secretly to itself) in 1948 that the proposed NAB scales for a couple were inadequate for subsistence even by Beveridge's standard (AST12/53, 15 April 1948, Appendix 1, para.4). Even allowing for the fact that Rowntree's 1950 survey failed 'to distinguish adequately between households and families as units of analysis' (Atkinson *et al.*, 1983, p.42), Atkinson and his colleagues found that in 1950 'the Rowntree scale was typically about 30-40 per cent higher than the National Assistance scale (except for single women)' (Atkinson *et al.*, 1981, p.67).

Was Beveridge's justification of the scales cynical if not downright mendacious? Atkinson (1991) has more generously suggested that the argument should be seen as the practice of various kinds of ambiguity. But while they may have a role in political rhetoric, he rightly criticised ambiguity in the scientific analysis of social policy, just the place where I think Beveridge used it. Atkinson cautiously avoided ascribing motives, yet we need greater clarity about human purpose to understand ambiguity. My reading of Beveridge is that he was consciously ambiguous. He claimed that his scales were minimally sufficient for all normal needs, enough to live on without supplementation. His comment about voluntary additions would be redundant if they were essential. He could have said publicly that his scales were of the minimum physical subsistence kind, enough for 'merely physical efficiency' (which is what they were supposed to be) but he chose not to do so, instead using the language of

adequacy which implied a social and not physical standard. To blind oneself to one's contradictions is a common failing, and perhaps Beveridge did so, given his earlier inability to distinguish the two measures of poverty. But he did know what his scales were based on and he did use different terminology to sell them. Without knowing his motives we may call it muddled; if we knew his intentions perhaps even mendacious.

One practical result of the Beveridge Committee's muddled assertions about adequacy has been the subsequent general British public confusion between poverty lines and social security scales. Another and more serious implication has been the political depreciation of, even mendacity about, the scale of suffering among the British population caused by inadequate wages and social security scales documented by, for instance, the Child Poverty Action Group since 1965 (Field, 1982) and by the research of people such as Peter Townsend (1979).

If British poverty is to be identified and relieved, we must first clarify the distinction between statistical measures of poverty and statutory measures of social security by demystifying the creation of the Beveridge pseudo-poverty line. And as Beveridge's comment about essential freedom continues to be as lively as ever, it continues to raise questions about individual freedom constrained by inadequate incomes.

NOTES

1 *A classification of approaches to definitions and measures of poverty by their prime purposes:*

The variety of definitions and measures of poverty can only be evaluated in specific relation to their various differing purposes. They all involve making judgements, which must therefore be explicitly stated and justified. The standards used derive either from expert (normative) prescriptions or from empirical social surveys of behaviour or opinion (consensual, majoritarian or hybrid). A more detailed discussion of this classification can be found in Veit-Wilson (1989, pp.77–83, 91, 93–94).

Prime purposes:

- a. To *count* the numbers defined as poor in the population.
- b. To *explain* why people are poor.
- c. To *prescribe* a poverty line: a minimum level of money income on which people ought to be able to live and avoid deprivation (as defined by the prescriber) if they spend their money as prescribed.
- d. To *report* a poverty line: a minimum level of money income on which the population in general thinks it would be able to live and avoid deprivation as it defines it.
- e. To *discover* a poverty line: a minimum level of money income on which empirical research shows that the population in general manages to avoid what it defines as deprivation.

Principal matters of judgement in operationalising definitions of poverty:

- a. *Appearances* of a poor lifestyle.
- b. *Components* of prescribed minimum 'shopping basket' (consumption items).
- c. *Proportion* of expenditure on food to take as indicating deprivation (Engel coefficient).
- d. *Percentage* of average incomes to take as indicating deprivation.

Classification of definitions of poverty by prime purpose and principal matters of judgement

<i>Types of Definition or Measure:</i>	<i>Prime Purpose and Judgement:</i>				
	<i>Count</i>	<i>Explain</i>	<i>Prescribe</i>	<i>Report</i>	<i>Discover</i>
1. Prescriptive standards					
Behavioural lifestyle	Appearances				
Pseudo-absolute: 'minimum subsistence', 'primary poverty'		Components			
Quasi-relative: 'Human Needs of Labour'			Components		
Engel [US method]			Components: Proportion		
Income elasticity					Components
Statistical	Percentage				
2. Empirical standards					
Leyden, 'Making Ends Meet'				Contribution	
'Welfare Function of Income'				Contribution	
Townsend, 1979					Indicators
Mack and Lansley, 1985					Majority: number
Empirical democratic					[All matters of judgement subject to population survey responses]

- e. *Contribution* of assets, intangible resources and other non-market consumption items to level of living beyond that provided by minimum disposable cash incomes.
- f. *Indicators* of necessities (unmet needs and deprivation).
- g. *Size* of majority of population assenting to definition of necessities.
- h. *Number* of deprivation indicators showing enforced deprivation.

2 There is rather little in the SIC files held by the Public Records Office relating specifically to the questions of poverty and subsistence; the chief sources are in the files in box 8 of the Beveridge Papers (BP8/) in the British Library of Political and Economic Science.

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File references

I have not used the physical location of the cited records as a means of referencing documents and files because it extends already lengthy references and the point is primarily to locate a document in a file. The list below gives the documents by their file references and date/author where available, and the following note should then enable readers to locate the files cited in the various archives. Where more than one file reference is given, this is where I found copies on the files listed, some of them in different archives.

- AST12/2, 19 July 1934, UAB Memorandum 9, 'Draft regulations', signed by W. Eady, although Lynes states it was probably written by George Reid.
- AST12/2, 30 August 1934, UAB Memorandum 14, 'A "scientific basis" for the assessment of needs', unsigned but reference on p.3 of UAB minutes of sixth meeting on 13 September 1934 (VM6/1) ascribes it to George Reid, UAB Assistant Secretary, later Secretary of the Assistance Board and a member of Beveridge's Subsistence Sub-Committee.
- AST7/337, 1942, 'A subsistence standard for the aged', no author or date but manuscript note 'Miss Ibberson ?1942' on front of associated memorandum, and internal evidence shows it is contemporaneous with SIC.
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T230/104 and BP8/28, 20 April 1942, 'Note on subsistence minimum for unemployment and sickness benefit'. The note is unsigned but the fuller version discussed at a meeting the next day (see BP8/28, 21 April 1942) has in manuscript 'DNC: Sir William Beveridge', perhaps implying that Chester wrote it. The later minute omits the passage quoted here. The copy on T230/104 has the last sentence cited here in Beveridge's handwriting; the copy on BP8/28 has only '[c]? allowance for inefficiency' in the same handwriting as 'DNC'.
- T230/104, undated, Professor A.L. Bowley, 'The dietary of an adult male'.
- T230/104, 26 May 1942, 'Note of a meeting on levels of subsistences' (sic).
- VM6/1, 13 September 1934, minutes of the sixth meeting of the UAB.

Location of files

Files in the Public Record Office, Kew, London:

Assistance Board	AST files
Cabinet:	CAB files
Ministry of Pensions:	PIN files
Treasury:	T files

Files in the British Library of Political and Economic Science, London:

- BP8/: The papers of William H. Beveridge (box 8, numbered files).
VM6/: The papers of Violet Markham (box 6, numbered files).

Files in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Library, York:

- SR/B: The papers of Benjamin Seebom Rowntree (section 'Rowntree and Beveridge'; numbered items).