

**SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.STAFF.NCL.AC.UK/J.VEIT-WILSON/](http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/j.veit-wilson/)
JOHN VEIT-WILSON'S PAPERS
ON CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS AND MEASURES OF POVERTY,
ON INCOME ADEQUACY AND ON MINIMUM INCOME STANDARDS.**

NB: this is the original text of the article below. If you want to quote the page numbers on which passages appeared in print, you will have to find the book or journal in which it was published. John Veit-Wilson asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Publication data: **House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee [eds][2004], *Child Poverty in the UK: Second report of Session 2003-04; vol 2: Written Evidence*, HC85-III, pp 146-164; also at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmworpen/85/85we40.htm>**

**MEMORANDUM TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS WORK AND PENSIONS
SELECT COMMITTEE ENQUIRY INTO CHILD POVERTY, SEPTEMBER 2003**

SUMMARY

This paper addresses the following points –

1. In considering how to identify and combat child poverty, the Select Committee must address the problem of **the government's resistance to using scientific methods** to find out what poverty means, what resources are needed to combat it, and at what income levels it affects families with children.
2. The number of children in poverty cannot be counted until there is agreement on how to measure poverty, and there will be no agreement until the **confusion by policy makers between scientific analysis and political objectives** has been clarified and dispelled.
3. The government wants a publicly credible and easily understood headline measure of child poverty, and the most straightforward and best understood and accepted measure of poverty is household cash income. But however many deprivations and social ills are to be included in the overview of child poverty, each should be defined and measured in its own right and not conflated into one measure. Having **an adequate household income is the best known and understood proxy** for the resources needed to overcome almost all of these deprivations.
4. **The European Union requires member states to implement policies to guarantee an adequate income** and resources to live in human dignity and to participate in society as full members. The UK cannot do this until it has introduced tools by which to discover what an adequate income is at which level human dignity and full participation are recognised. Poverty will continue by definition until this has been done.
5. Given that scientific methods alone do not meet political goals, the only reliable, robust and politically viable method of devising measuring tools in the UK is by **triangulation of reliable evidence from many sources of data to construct governmental minimum income standards**. The Select Committee has recently considered this question and made recommendations to Parliament. These should be repeated and implemented. It should also enquire into the minimum income standards tacitly used by **HM Treasury**.
6. Constructing governmental minimum income standards by triangulation will require the interpretation of a range of scientifically reliable findings about many kinds of deprivation

and social ills. This cannot be done by either social scientists, statisticians or officials alone. **Judgement will have to be exercised** by committee. A key issue for the Select Committee must be the criteria by which the committee is to exercise its judgement. These criteria should be open to public scrutiny and debate: poverty cannot be *defined* by government policy objectives.

7. The vocabulary of poverty debate is now so complex and so widely misunderstood, as the DWP consultation document and preliminary conclusions show, that **a return to using agreed customary meanings is essential** if there is to be progress on understanding the problem of child poverty and making constructive policy to combat it.

Introduction.

1. If the children in poverty in the UK are to be counted, we must first agree on a definition of poverty and how to measure by that definition. Only when that is agreed can we move on to discuss what causes poverty as conceptualised and defined in that way and who is poor. The analysis of policy must follow those stages, not precede them.

2. No one but the people in a society can say how that society defines poverty.¹ Governments may want to do so, but they will be discredited if their definitions are too narrow and their measures too low, for people's experience of persistent deprivation (as they see it) above a government's prescribed poverty measure shows the government was wrong. Only social science methods can capture what society means, and only those methods and tools, open to scientific debate and agreement, subject to testing, replication and refutation, can assess the nature and extent of the problem of poverty.

3. The trouble is that this and previous UK governments reject certain scientific methods or findings in the field of poverty research as valid for policy making. More UK government ministers than there is space to quote here have denied for decades that science has any part to play in the question of 'how much is enough?'. Either they report that scientific agreement is impossible because the scientific experts do not agree, or they deny the possibility of applicable scientific research in this field. This is because they confuse the scope of scientific analysis with their pursuit of political objectives.

4. The political objections to scientific measures on their own can be overcome by the use of governmental minimum income standards as other countries do, including the USA. The Social Security Select Committee has already accepted the evidence in 2001.² Naturally the precise basis on which the governmental minimum income standards are founded varies according to the political culture of the countries concerned, but in each case they draw on national evidence of adequate incomes in their countries.³ In the UK, the political culture is now explicitly demanding 'evidence-based' policy. To demand that the measure of child poverty should be based on hard evidence and not on mere assumption is the thrust of this submission.

5. The UK government seems not to have accepted the recommendations which the Select Committee report on *Integrated Child Credit* (2001) made for governmental minimum income standards. I must therefore return to the subject here, since it is central to the current Work and Pensions Select Committee enquiry.

6. I am responding to the first of the two major areas into which the Select Committee is to enquire, the examination of the extent of child poverty in the UK. The paper focuses on the prior issue, the measurement of child poverty, since all else follows from that. The Department for Work and Pensions has already consulted widely on how to measure child poverty during 2002. It published a *consultation document* which set out the problems as it

¹ Scientists differ on whether people are aware of all their authentic needs, unmet as well as met, but agree that, whatever they are, they must be expressed within that society's own common culture and not some other.

² Social Security Committee (2001), *Integrated Child Credit*, HC72, paragraphs 24 and 25.

³ For more details, see J Veit-Wilson (1998), *Setting Adequacy Standards: How governments define minimum incomes*, The Policy Press, Bristol.

saw them (DWP 2002). It has now published a report on its *preliminary conclusions* (DWP 2003). I submitted a memorandum to the consultation, and it covers much of the basic ground I want to put before the Select Committee now. It also shows the difficulties and confusions in the DWP approach, as well as suggesting how its legitimate concerns and objectives can be met. It is therefore attached as **appendix A** to this paper.

7. The two documents from the DWP revealed widespread misunderstandings about many technical issues of poverty conceptualisation and measurement which regrettably vitiated many of its conclusions. Because this reflects the underlying political problem, the first point must be to ask the Select Committee to confront this problem explicitly.

1. The government's resistance to using scientific methods to measure poverty.

8. The Minister Malcolm Wicks MP himself described the search for scientific poverty measures as "a Holy Grail that is absurd to pursue".⁴ He went on to say that his constituents tell him that "they are not worried about academic measures, they are worried about poverty and how to get out of it". These statements reflect two 'political truths'. The first statement reflects the very long-standing UK government reluctance to admit the validity of any rigorous examination of the meaning of poverty or the adequacy of the income maintenance benefits to combat it, for fear that the findings might embarrass the government by revealing that minimum benefit levels were inadequate.⁵

9. The second statement, with which we might all agree, reflects that the language in which Mr Wicks's constituents conceptualise poverty is not the same as the language in which his officials frame their proposals for measuring child poverty. Social scientists have the tools for bridging this gap, but although official language has some similarities to scientific language, the values and objectives of policy makers and social scientists are very different and often in conflict. The DWP must therefore be commended for consulting children and parents about the meanings they attached to the idea of poverty. Almost all of them responded that money, or the things that money can buy, were central to their idea of poverty, so it is puzzling that the DWP still resists finding out how much money income is needed not to experience poverty.

10. As to the fear that evidence of inadequate incomes might embarrass the government, the Select Committee should note that some (but not all) of the countries which use governmental minimum income standards as political guides to the adequacy of the various tiers of their income maintenance systems also use them to measure poverty.⁶ For example, the United States government seems comfortable using its 'poverty line' (what should be called a governmental minimum income standard) to count people in poverty while the US federal and state governments do not pay income maintenance benefits at anything like this level. In countries where governmental minimum income standards relate to higher tiers of income maintenance such as minimum wages or pensions, social assistance benefits may be lower.

11. Second, UK governments resist scientific evidence of the adequacy of household incomes, which is a matter of discovering and *evaluating the quality* of levels of living or the meaning of welfare. But they do not resist scientific research offering descriptions of household economies, or the descriptive analysis of the income distribution. The resistance is not to social science methods as such but only to reliable research evidence of what Mr Wicks's constituents and other people like them conclude about what is an adequate income which will get them out of their poverty. This shows that the resistance is simply political.

⁴ BBC Radio 4, 'Inside Money', 3 August 2002.

⁵ See for example the historical record of UK government policy on this subject reported in my evidence to the Social Services Select Committee's Enquiry into *Minimum Incomes* in 1989 (HOC Paper 579) and research on the 1965 Windsor Report on the National Assistance Scale Rates (Veit-Wilson 1999a, listed in appendix A).

⁶ See Veit-Wilson (1998), *Setting Adequacy Standards*, cited above, chapter 4.

2. The policy makers' confusion between analysis and politics.

12. The UK is thus in the paradoxical position that the government counts the people in poverty by a statistical measure of income inequality (Households Below Average Income) which has nothing to do with poverty, at the same time as the Prime Minister himself states on television that the real problem is not inequality of incomes but the (in)adequacy of the lowest incomes to allow people to escape poverty.⁷ The paradoxes continue. The DWP wants an easily comprehensible headline measure of child poverty with public credibility, which the majority of its respondents say must be largely a matter of money incomes, but the response is to dismiss governmental minimum income standards as if their promise for meeting these and political requirements has not been understood. Further, the EU asked member states to report what they are doing to guarantee adequate incomes, included among the three basic objectives of their National Action Plans against Poverty and Social Exclusion, but the UK government's response omits mention of how it is to discover or guarantee adequacy.⁸ These issues are discussed further below, as well as in appendix A.

13. The picture is thus, to put it at its best, one of total government confusion over the question of how to measure child poverty. That is why I put the need to address the grounds for the confusion, and the government's unnecessary muddle between scientific and political objectives, as an important part of the problem into which this enquiry is being held. The confusions between scientific and political definitions of the problems and response are discussed at greater length in **appendix B**.

3. What is the poverty to be measured?

14. If child poverty is to be measured, the Select Committee will first have to come to a conclusion about what it wants to understand as 'child poverty'. Poverty causes human suffering and is too important to be treated as a mere debating matter.

15. It is very important for the welfare of children in the UK today and in the future that the Select Committee wrests back the poverty measurement agenda from the unnecessarily restricted possibilities suggested by the DWP consultation, and prevents the DWP's political clout from forcing a closure on the public awareness and consideration of other and more effective ways of achieving both the DWP's valid political goals and the wider objective of child poverty elimination in the UK.

16. **Broad or narrow?** The first question to be answered is whether child poverty is to be understood as a broad range of outcomes (the DWP approach, exemplified in *Opportunity for all*), or as the lack of a narrow range of resources, chiefly money incomes, which influences almost all of those outcomes.

17. Quite apart from the promise to abolish child poverty, whatever that is taken to be, the government has long been concerned about a range of social evils and ills in the fields chiefly of child development, health, housing, education, employment, and social behaviour, which it wants to combat and prevent. It has recognised that material conditions over time are a major factor in causing these and similar social ills, though it also seems to welcome behavioural explanations divorced from their material preconditions (for instance, reluctance to work rather than job unavailability as the explanation of unemployment). It wants to be able to measure change in each of the fields in which its policies might be seen to have had some effect. It labels some of these social ills as 'poverty', but also as 'social exclusion', and recognises that some of them are called 'deprivations'. None of these terms have precise or agreed meanings in common usage and many versions are on offer, broader and narrower.

⁷ Tony Blair, BBC Newsnight interview with Jeremy Paxman, 4 June 2001. See appendix A paragraph 29.

⁸ Council of the European Union, Social Protection Committee (25.11.2002), *Fight against poverty and social exclusion: common objectives for the second round of National Action Plans*, 14164/1/02, Annex to annex 2, 'Objectives' (section 1.2 (a)); DWP (2003), *United Kingdom National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2003-05*, (see section 3.2.2).

18. The government also recognises that having enough money income is a major factor in people's ability to buy their way (and their children's way) out of many if not all of the social ills and evils. Not only do most of the respondents confirm that this is fact, but the DWP's statements repeatedly endorse that understanding, though the DWP usually qualifies it – "Whilst low income is central to poverty, it is not the only dimension" which affects a child's opportunities. Clearly that statement must be true, but we are not talking about the whole range of opportunities open to a child – we are talking about measuring the lack of household income which is either poverty in itself (narrow) or the means by which to buy its way out of poverty (broad). It is an example of the DWP's confusion of scientific analysis and political language and objectives.

19. Even if the broad approach is adopted, there are still two distinct issues here. One is the description and measurement of the range of levels of living, just as the government does with incomes. This would allow what the DWP calls the dimensions of "a child's quality of life" to be measured, across the range of all children's experience. But the second issue is, as with the measurement of incomes, the standard by which the quality of life is to be evaluated and identified as either 'poverty' or 'not-poverty' – and that either in publicly credible or politically expedient terms. We cannot discover what the meaning and condition of poverty is without examining the level of living of the whole of society, but we cannot identify it without a separate evaluative standard, a criterion which ought equally (in a democratic society) to derive from the whole of society and which may not coincide with or be expressed in the same way as the judgements of political or professional élites.

20. The Select Committee may share the DWP's aim of finding tools to measure quality of life (an outcome of having resources) or the adequacy of the range of resources which provide it (the inputs), or it may take a different view that both need measuring, but not in the same incompatible measure. The DWP's answer seems to be that it wants to measure both, but preferably only those inputs and outcomes which form part of the government's policy agenda. The adequacy for purpose and objective of health, education and employment policies and provisions are constantly assessed, but, as noted before, the adequacy of incomes to avoid poverty has never been part of the UK government agenda.

21. **Static or dynamic views?** It is useful to have a single poverty measure as an easily quotable headline, but the government would prefer it to include a broad range of outcome aspects. At the same time, it wants to deal with the causes of social evils as long as they do not raise questions about traditionally sensitive subjects such as the adequacy of income maintenance benefits. It often overlooks the problem of the dynamic chain, that the *causes* of a *condition* of social ill lead to *consequences* (outcomes) which may themselves be the causes of or inputs to a further social ill condition, as for instance where low household income influences poor maternal diet which influences a child's health and its ability to benefit from education and its future job prospects, and thus in a circle. The Select Committee's deliberations will be helped by distinguishing between the elements of this chain of causes and effects.

22. Policy considerations rightly affect which parts of this whole package of bad social conditions and their causes and consequences the DWP wishes to concentrate on, but this focus may not be what the scientific commentators who have responded to the consultations so far have seen as the salient issues, for reasons touched on above. The Select Committee should take a less DWP-policy-bound perspective in its deliberations, and instead treat each element of this broad and complex picture as requiring measurement and standard-setting in its own right. Narrowness then becomes the virtue of precision in identifying the issues and focusing on them one at a time. Precise analytical focus must include return to the area the DWP avoids, the measurement of the adequacy of income inputs to avoid the adverse outcomes government is rightly concerned about. In this way the distinction between broad and narrow approaches to measuring poverty is seen as false. The real issue is how to identify and measure each relevant element in the causal chain.

23. For these reasons I strongly recommend that all the dimensions of poverty or deprivation and of their outcomes which the Select Committee decides to identify as important in any explanation of what poverty is should each be separately measured using the scientific methods appropriate to that dimension. Composite measures which combine these elements are simply devices for easy communication of a complicated picture, as the DWP pointed out in claiming this as a desirable objective. That claim in itself exposes the DWP's measures as a presentational device and disqualifies them as a scientific analysis of the realities of child poverty. This again exemplifies the DWP's confusion of issues, and if the measure lacks integrity it will also lack credibility.

24. It is indisputable that in an increasingly marketised economy where consumers are expected to exercise choice by using their money incomes, the most important resource every household must have is enough income to take a decent part in society. The abolition of child poverty is unachievable without adequate money incomes; they must therefore be measured. Children in families which have enough money do not suffer the social ills and outcomes which concern the government (or at any rate they are not then called poverty). How much money is that?

How to measure poverty.

25. Others will comment on the measures appropriate to the wide range of adverse outcomes for children of living in poor families. My concern is with two kinds of measurement which are central to the Select Committee enquiry –

- (a) Measuring the standards by which society defines a certain level of living as poor or deprived;
- (b) Measuring the resources, including money incomes, needed over time and at a point in time to establish and sustain a level of living which is not poor or deprived by the standards which society has set and discovered by (a).

26. On (a), the best existing research is that which uses a range of appropriate methods, qualitative and quantitative, to find out from UK society what it sees as the minimum acceptable levels of living and necessities which no one should be without, and which augments this with the advice of recognised experts in fields such as child nutrition, health and education to produce a full picture of the required 'standard of living' (in the proper evaluative sense of the word 'standard') which every child should experience.

27. This is the kind of research carried out by the teams which produced the report on *Poverty and social exclusion in Britain* in 2000.⁹ The Select Committee should recommend that such work be funded by the government but carried out independently on a periodic basis such as every five years. By combining the approaches and findings of several different methods of scientific research, it has many of the advantages of triangulation in providing a solid foundation for its findings.

28. On (b), the findings of many years of research into the dynamics of deprivations show the role of a variety of tangible and intangible resources, but leaving human personality variation aside, what emerges from disentangling the chain of causes, conditions and consequences is the role of whatever can be turned into a flow of money income. Only those who wish to avoid the implications of this conclusion constantly try to divert attention away from the role of money to other resources (often forgetting that these too can be acquired over time given enough money). The rest of society knows very well that people who have enough money buy their way out of almost all deprivations if they want, and by definition out of everything that would be called poverty.

29. The conclusion is inescapable. As the DWP reported –

⁹ D. Gordon et al (2000), *Poverty and social exclusion in Britain*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

"... most who expressed a view saw low income as being central to any poverty measure, with most perceiving the pledge to eradicate child poverty as being related to income poverty." (DWP 2003 p 31)

"There was a near universal view that income was central to any headline or summary measure used to track child poverty in the long term." (DWP 2003 p 33)¹⁰

30. The question then is, how to measure the money incomes needed to avoid poverty. This subject has had a lot of attention since Seebohm Rowntree devised a primary poverty measure in 1899, in fact to show that many workers' families had lower incomes than what was needed for physical subsistence alone. Such 'absolute' measures are now discredited, and three methods are currently used –

31. (i) to discover the level of household income which is found statistically to correlate with a minimally adequate standard of living. This is the method pioneered by the Abel-Smith and Townsend sociological research team in the 1960s and used in amended forms by many subsequent researchers.¹¹ It is a direct method because it starts with the actual level of living which responses show is marginally adequate (not suffering several socially-defined deprivations) and then discovers by reliable statistical methods at what income levels it is on average just achieved. The money measures are a statistical derivative found by research; they are not described or prescribed by the population surveyed or the researchers.

32. (ii) to ask the population at what level of household income they can 'just make ends meet' or 'just get by'. This is an indirect method because it uses the responses as a proxy for the real marginal level of living reflected by 'making ends meet' or 'just getting by' or similar expressions. This method was pioneered by public opinion pollsters in the USA in the 1930s and made technically sophisticated by econometricians at the Universities of Leyden and Antwerp in the 1970s; it also has been amended and widely used since then.¹² It treats public opinion and attitudes as being as valid in this field as it is in all other political research.

33. (iii) to build up highly detailed lists of every conceivable component of the standard of living which is to be achieved, by asking the population what it considers necessary and by studying what the population actually does buy across the income range, augmented and qualified by the views of experts in fields such as nutrition, health and household economy, and then costing them in a given place and time. This is also a direct method and was pioneered by the UK's Family Budget Unit in the 1980s. Variants of the method have used different sources to judge what are the standards of living to be achieved and their essential components to be included. These budget studies use the findings of social research on what society defines as necessities, and some are enriched by basing their judgements of what to include and to what standard on the advice of ordinary people in focus groups.¹³

34. Each of these intensive scientific methods produces valid and reliable findings, even if they are not sufficiently understood by politicians and officials who have other agendas. But precisely because their methods and findings are not identical (as the government says, 'the experts do not agree'), and precisely because the objective is a measure which is both scientifically *and* publicly credible, the Select Committee should recommend that all of these methods be used in research to find out what required income figures they produce for households containing children to avoid poverty and deprivations. The results of this and much other relevant evidence should be studied by a panel of experts, such as those who advise the DWP, or by some other independent research institute, and compared and calibrated ('triangulated') to produce the unified poverty measure which is wanted. The

¹⁰ DWP (2003), *Measuring child poverty: preliminary conclusions*.

¹¹ See Gordon et al (2000) cited above.

¹² See K. Van den Bosch (2001), *Identifying the Poor*, Ashgate, Aldershot.

¹³ S. Middleton (2000), "Agreeing Poverty Lines: The Development of Consensual Budget Standards Methodology", in J. Bradshaw and R. Sainsbury (eds), *Researching Poverty*, Ashgate, Aldershot.

production of politically credible governmental minimum income standards then becomes feasible.

35. Such a unified measure would of course vary for households of varying size and composition, and the whole question of evidence-based equivalence scales still needs much further study. But it would allow the reliable identification and counting of all households in the UK (by sample survey or other methods), to discover how many children live in poverty as society defines it. However, if the Select Committee wishes to retain the HBAI statistical measures of income inequality, it should recommend three qualifications to their use –

1. until the percentage has been scientifically validated as a measure of poverty they should be referred to only as measures of low income;
2. using the methods above for scientific validation, and triangulating with other data sources on social ills caused by low incomes, the government should sponsor or carry out the research needed to show at *what* percentage of median incomes households with children on average actually achieve the socially-defined minimum adequate standard of living and avoid the social ills;
3. the government should publish the findings of this research annually and should publish time series of changes in the actual percentage of median income found to be needed by households with children to avoid poverty.

36. The DWP needs a measure which allows time series to be collected, and this would allow monitoring of the effectiveness of government policies to reduce child poverty in terms of the actual levels of minimally adequate household income and in terms of the relationship to median household incomes, both of which are likely to change over time.

4. The European Union's recommendations on adequate incomes.

37. The question for the Select Committee is not only what are UK views on what child poverty means and how to measure it, but does the European Union's requirement that the UK government (like others) should provide adequate social protection have implications for the standards to be applied to the choice of measures. The EU's *National Action Plans against Poverty and Social Exclusion for 2003-2005*, require member states to report what they plan to do "to organise social protection systems in such a way that they help, in particular, to **guarantee** that everyone has the resources necessary to live in accordance with human **dignity**"¹⁴, a phrase which seems synonymous with an adequate income.

38. The EU official statements suggest that the minimum standards to be applied must reflect what in the UK is taken as the meaning of living 'in a manner compatible with human **dignity**'.¹⁵ The UN suggests this should achieve a level of living which enables the poorest to 'appear in public **without shame**'.¹⁶ The EU emphasises that this requires Member States to ensure that everyone has access to 'a wage **sufficient** to enable them to have a **decent** standard of living'¹⁷ and to '**adequate** social protection'.¹⁸ In the EU, adequacy means 'a **sufficient** income to lead a life with **dignity** and to **participate** in society as full members'.¹⁹

39. There are many similar examples in the international declarations about human values and rights to welfare, including the right to an adequate standard of living and to sufficient resources to enable it to be achieved. For instance, the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948, Article 25, states that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living **adequate** for the health and well-being of himself and of his family", rights reconfirmed

¹⁴ Council of the European Union, Social Protection Committee (25.11. 2002), cited above; emphasis added to this and the subsequent quotations.

¹⁵ European Community, Council Recommendation of 24 June 1992, 92/441/EEC, para (6).1.C.3, and elsewhere.

¹⁶ UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Draft Guidelines: A Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies*, 10.9.2002, Guideline 12, p 42.

¹⁷ European Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers, 1989, para 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, para 10.

¹⁹ European Commission, Joint Report on Social Inclusion; Employment and Social Affairs, 2002, p 27.

by the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and again by the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. Article 27-1 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989, "states Parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living **adequate** for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development".

40. What does the right to security mean in the UK if not an adequate income? And what is an adequate standard of living if it is not sufficient for decency and dignity and for participation as full members without shame as UK society sees it? These questions are not separate from 'what is poverty', they are aspects of the same question, what concept of poverty is to be applied and how can we identify and measure it? No amount of government assertion that other income measures can be 'assumed' to be poverty measures will be credible if it fails to produce evidence that the decent, dignified, participatory and shame-free standard of living which guarantees every child the outcomes listed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child can be achieved on that income level.

5 and 6. Political goals – the need for governmental minimum income standards as poverty measures.

41. The government is right to seek an official poverty measure (what should be called a governmental minimum income standard) which is publicly credible, methodologically defensible and administratively feasible (as the US official enquiry into its government poverty measure put it²⁰). The Select Committee will however have to re-emphasise to government what its report on *Integrated Child Credit* investigated and recommended in 2001, since its conclusions that the government should sponsor a range of research and have it independently monitored on a standing basis seem to have been overlooked.²¹

42. The DWP's dismissal of the potential of governmental minimum income standards as a basis for measuring child poverty, set out on page 44 of *Preliminary conclusions*, is at best based on a complete misunderstanding of the issues. As criticism by the DWP will carry weight with the uninformed, it is essential that the points it makes against governmental minimum income standards are answered. There are several detailed points, but I shall mention only two aspects of its criticisms: (a) whose assumptions or judgement are to be taken seriously, and (b) what possible factors should be taken into account in constructing a governmental minimum income standard.

43. (a) The DWP is confused about the meaning of subjective assumptions by contrast with objective facts. The version which is relevant to this enquiry is that in which public opinion about poverty standards and deprivation indicators is disparaged as mere subjective opinion, to set against the objective facts of statistical income distributions. In dismissing the potential of scientific research to constructing governmental minimum income standards, the DWP states that "Different research methods tend to make different assumptions that are essentially subjective".²² This and other dismissive comments are puzzling in a document based entirely on subjective assumptions. But it seems to be no more than a political diversion, perhaps reflecting the resistance to scientific research, which is apparent when one considers that the choice of 60 per cent of median household incomes and the equivalence scales it incorporates as a poverty measure are equally nothing more than subjective assumptions as long as there is no objective factual evidence to support them.

44. By contrast, the scientific collection of a large number of individual subjective opinions on what are necessities which no one should be without, or the incomes at which households can only just 'make ends meet' (the deprivation indicator and income proxy approaches to poverty), becomes an objective social fact which governments disparage at their peril. Governments treat objective social facts about very subjective public opinion as highly reliable and important in parliamentary elections, and there is no reason for treating

²⁰ C. Citro and R. Michael (1995), *Measuring Poverty*, National Academy Press, Washington DC.

²¹ House of Commons Paper HC72, paragraphs 24 and 25.

²² DWP (2003), *Preliminary conclusions*, p 44.

them any less seriously when they want to measure poverty, about which the public is not likely to be less well informed.

45. If the neutral word '**judgement**' is substituted for the negative connotations of 'subjective assumption', we can see how the DWP documents refer to judgement disparagingly, as if measures which do not involve judgement are to be preferred to those which do. But as with the idea of relativity, there is no conceivable measure which does not involve judgements being made by somebody at some stage. It is notable that the DWP never recognises that the arbitrary decision about which percentage of the median income to take as the poverty measure is nothing more than judgement, but that may be because the decision is taken by officially recognised statisticians. The key issue is who is making the judgement, who recognises a judgement as a valid objective fact or dismisses it as mere subjective opinion, and why?

46. To return to productive enquiry and avoid this kind of confusion, it would be better if these unavoidable judgements were made openly by society as a whole (and revealed by reliable social science research) than made by government officials alone, particularly not if there is a risk that any judgements which do not fit the preordained and required political frame of reference are misunderstood or disparaged. As with so much else, judgement must be transparent to public scrutiny and debate, as in the Select Committee's current enquiry.

47. (b) The DWP's rejection of governmental minimum income standards seems to assume that budget studies are their only basis, and it rejects budget studies for reasons concerned with its misunderstanding about judgement. These are both mistaken assumptions.

48. Governmental minimum income standards can be based on whatever publicly credible evidence is accepted that a given level of income roughly corresponds to society's views about adequacy for a decent level of living. The research in ten countries studied²³ showed that the kinds of acceptable evidence varied. Some countries do indeed use a variety of budget studies, but others use intensive political negotiation between members of parliament, one including representative interest groups of disabled and retired people. One country bases its standards on negotiation of the minimum wage between employers, trade unions and government nominees; others use publicly accepted relationships to wage indices, while another constructs its standards on studies of wage earning households' income and consumption patterns. The point is that to achieve public and political credibility, each country must choose the range of data relevant to its consideration of standards in terms of what its political culture considers to be acceptable.

49. In the UK, the government has already given guidance on what it thinks should guide the formulation of policy, and that is solid evidence – it aims to make 'evidence based policy'. Entirely in accordance with the government's preference for evidence, I therefore proposed that in the UK the governmental minimum income standards should be based on the collection of as much evidence as can be collected about the social ills which concern the government and the public, and the income levels at which these ills are experienced. Such evidence will relate to what the public considers to be deprivation, as well as to what the experts consider to be malnutrition, poor health and excesses of age related morbidity, premature mortality, low educational attainment and so on.

50. Such collections of evidence – and there are many sources of data in existence – show that increasing social ills and deprivations correlate quite closely with lower incomes in some instances, only loosely with income but more closely with occupational position in others, and not with income at all in the case of some social ills and experiences of social exclusion. What is essential is to find out which ones do correlate, and at what income levels. This is not a matter for prior decision – it demands to be treated as a study in itself, to be carried out in a proper scientific manner and not subject to political considerations.

²³ For details, see Veit-Wilson (1998), *Setting Adequacy Standards*, cited above.

51. Such a study has not yet been done, but when it has, it is likely that it will find that different social deprivations and ills correlate with the income gradient (making allowances for the differences in the ages and composition of households) at a variety of points on the income scale. Further, some correlations may show a threshold, a change in the income curve where 'poverty' can be said to occur, while others may progress more regularly, making it impossible to perceive a distinct poverty threshold. The answers will indeed be 'inconsistent', as the DWP complains, but there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that they should all coincide. Deprivations may occur at many different income levels; the question is, at what level of low income, if any, do they become cumulative and damaging to people's social, psychological and physical health?

52. The range of findings is thus not an objection to the method: on the contrary, it is precisely in dealing with such findings that the experts have to use their judgement to interpret both public opinion and scientific views on how much of the morbidity, deprivation or whatever is to be taken as tolerable and how much to be treated as a matter for action. The boundary between the tolerable and the intolerable is a matter not only for experts but one on which the rest of society has important views, and they too must be taken into account. For example, the intolerable deprivations suffered by people in poverty are often treated as tolerable by those who are not poor and do not suffer them. For that reason alone, it is always essential to canvass the judgement of those with the lowest incomes, until the time and point is reached where the ideas of what is adequate, decent and tolerable are no longer different between the mass of society and those with the lowest incomes, and prevailing conditions and incomes are tolerated as decent and dignified by all. At that point, *and not before*, the government will know it has abolished poverty, even if not inequality.

53. The collection of a range of different types of evidence of deprivations and social ills from many data sources and its intensive comparison and calibration to see what the range of data suggests as the levels of income at which people become deprived and suffer social ills is what I called **triangulation**. I hope the Select Committee will reiterate its previous recommendation that research be carried out which will facilitate this method of arriving at the evidence-based policy which the government rightly wants.²⁴

54. The DWP also criticises governmental minimum income standards because, it believes, it would be difficult to generate a long term and robust time series. The criticism may reflect political fears and incomprehension of issues around the meaning of poverty which are discussed above. There is no greater difficulty in generating time series from poverty as defined by society and measured by governmental minimum income standards than by any other method, and it would be more meaningful than the DWP's misnamed 'absolute'²⁵ method even if not so expedient for the government.

55. Today's poverty is meaningful to the people who experience it and its consequences only in terms of the standards which society sets and expects *today*. No one will be satisfied to be told by government that those in poverty today are not poor by the outdated standards of the past. Use of this anachronistic pseudo-absolute comparison may appear good for political presentation but cannot expect public credence or scientific support. It is questionable if the DWP should seek to generate misleading political statistics.²⁶

56. **The role of HM Treasury in setting standards of income adequacy.** Although this is the Work and Pensions Committee's enquiry reviewing DWP activities, the enquiry must also take into account the tacit role of the Treasury in setting income standards. Throughout the open and undisputed rule of less-eligibility in the UK's social assistance system for the past two hundred years, the elite standard of comparison for judging income adequacy for the poor has been the lowest levels of wages, modified to some extent since 1945 by

²⁴ House of Commons Paper HC72, paragraphs 24 and 25.

²⁵ For a note on the DWP's use of the terms absolute and relative, see below.

²⁶ Provided the DWP generates good statistics on the movements in current governmental minimum income standards and poverty measured by them, then historians can make the required adjustments to make anachronistic comparisons for themselves if they wish.

allowances for children. Since the increased intervention in adjusting these wage levels introduced by the present government, both through the minimum wage and through the introduction and extension of tax credit provisions, the implicit real minimum comparable standards of income adequacy must have been raised. The Treasury is responsible for these policies but has never publicly revealed its judgement on where the income floor should now stand, yet its calculations implicitly contain such a judgement. If they did not do so, then why should public money be spent on tax credits to raise the floor? Officials must have successfully argued that incomes should not be allowed to fall below this level.

57. The Select Committee should invite the Treasury to give evidence on what standards it uses to judge at what level to set the income floors for the combined family benefits, and how it derives them, since this information must form part of the whole picture of government views the Select Committee will want to take into account for child poverty measures.

7. Understanding the vocabulary.

58. **Muddles about words.** Before the Select Committee comes to a conclusion on the approach to poverty it prefers, it will need to take account of the common confusions, shared by the DWP reports, between concepts, definitions, identifiers, indicators and measures, quite apart from policies. It is analytically naïve to treat, for example, definitions or indicators as synonymous with measures, and to confuse them is to make debate meaningless and analysis futile.

59. This section therefore comments on these terms to distinguish definitions from measures, identifiers from indicators, to help the Select Committee to be able to ask the DWP, what concept of poverty is it using? How does the DWP define it? How would the DWP identify its presence or absence? What indicators validly measure progress in abolishing the poverty it has chosen to define? What standards of adequacy, acceptability or sufficiency are embodied in the measures which it has chosen by which to tell if its goals have been achieved, and whose standards are they? If the DWP cannot answer these questions or treats them as naïve or unimportant, how can it expect to make clear and coherent policy?

Concepts, definitions, identifiers, indicators, standards – and measures.

60. Concepts are ideas, and definitions are the precise ways in which they are formulated so that they can be used in specific contexts. In common usage, which includes government, they are very frequently confused with what identifies the phenomenon's presence and the indicators used to observe trends, as well as with the standards used to judge the phenomenon. Words change their meanings in common usage, but there is no point in debate if we do not use agreed terminology. What the Select Committee wants is a measure of something which must first be independently conceptualised and defined before its extent can be measured according to agreed and credible standards.

61. **Concepts.** Taking a broad view, there is little disagreement that the concept of poverty embraces notions of deprived levels of living which are treated as unacceptable in terms of any society's dominant standards. This involves discovering how that society judges and identifies what is and what is not an adequate or satisfactory level of living, one that affords decency, dignity and the means with which to participate to all its members. It is not the same as the broad concept of social exclusion. There is a large literature on that subject, not pursued here, which treats it as a matter of unequal social and power relations with certain social ills as consequences. The reasons for social exclusion, and by extension the government's concern about social inclusion, may include poverty but not exclusively so. Consequently the policy implications of each are not the same. The Select Committee should clarify its approach to each of these deprivations, of well-being and of power.

62. **Definitions.** When it comes to definition, the precise formulation of what words mean, then there is far more disagreement about poverty. As noted above, some prefer to word the meaning broadly, including not only the condition of an unsatisfactory level of living

with all the deprivations that implies but also the causes of that condition, lack of resources and social exclusions.²⁷ Some also include the network of interlinked consequences of the lack of resources, such as poor nutrition, health, housing, educational achievement, employment opportunities and the like. Judging by the DWP's publications, this is its preferred approach. But it is not helpful for policy formulation to confuse causes, conditions and consequences in one definition. They are inevitably linked but they are analytically distinct.

63. Others define the word poverty more narrowly, meaning a specific lack of the money resources – flows of disposable incomes from all sources – by which most kinds of deprivations can be overcome. In increasingly marketised economies, adequate personal purchasing power overcomes all enforced deprivations and even many social exclusions apart from some which are imposed on gender, ethnicity, legal status and age (though in the UK the very rich with these characteristics overcome being 'excluded' by them). Decades of research into all kinds of social ills and evils, and into socially defined deprivations, repeatedly shows – as if it were needed to confirm what common sense tells us all – that if one has a reasonable income one does not suffer 'an *enforced* lack of socially perceived necessities' and the deleterious consequences of low levels of living, because one can 'buy out' of the deprivations, if one chooses to.

64. The Select Committee must decide which definition of poverty it prefers. But to choose a broad concept does not prevent it from adopting a narrower and more precise definition, such as Mack and Lansley's phrase, 'an enforced lack of socially perceived necessities'.²⁸ In her evidence to this Select Committee, Professor Ruth Lister proposes a definition of poverty as "an inability to participate in society and to enjoy a standard of living consistent with human dignity and minimum standards of social decency due to lack of resources". The important references here to dignity and decency are reminders that the EU has for many years set the implementation of these concepts as the requirements of each member state's social protection and income maintenance schemes. Since dignity and decency are not measured by income inequality statistics, the Select Committee will want to find a credible definition which includes them.

65. **Identifiers.** How poverty is identified is not the same as its definition. It may be identified very directly by the absence of the elements which society takes as composing an adequate level of living, what have become known as the deprivation indicators following several research studies into what the UK population saw as necessities which no one should be without.²⁹ It can only be identified by receipt of social security benefits if evidence shows they are inadequate. The government itself has escaped from the former tautology of identifying those receiving social assistance benefits or at comparable income levels as being poor.

66. However, when there is reliable evidence of the income levels at which these lacks of socially perceived necessities occur or social and material well-being is not achieved, then the common indirect or proxy identifier of poverty can be a low income level. But while a low level associated with deprivations is an identifier of poverty, it is not in itself a definition of poverty, nor is it a measure of poverty if it is not supported by hard scientific evidence that this is (making all necessary allowances for variations) the income level which on average divides those in poverty from those who are not. Until the government provides hard evidence for scientific scrutiny, we have to continue to base our judgement on old evidence which suggested that its HBAI low income measure may be an identifier of people *in* poverty

²⁷ Those who think that the *causes* of poverty include such conditions as unemployment, lone parenthood, disability and old age, should recall that these conditions are found right across UK society up to the very highest and richest levels without causing deprivations or exclusions. The cause of poverty is the lack of adequate incomes which is a consequence of these conditions for most people if the government's income maintenance system is inadequate and ineffective.

²⁸ J. Mack and S. Lansley (1985), *Poor Britain*, Allen and Unwin, London, p 39.

²⁹ See for example Gordon et al (2000), cited above.

but it is not a measure of what *separates* poverty from not-poverty as society defines it. The question demands scientific testing – it cannot be settled by official prescription.

67. **Indicators.** The DWP makes much use of indicators of deprived social conditions in its annual reports, *Opportunity for all*, as well as in its consultation reports. Many of these are *trend markers*; that is, they show in which direction and how far a particular factor is moving. Although the DWP seems to treat them as substitutes for poverty measures, they are very different – as all footballers know, improvements in striking are by no means the same as goals achieved. Indicators have an essential place in monitoring policies to see that they are moving in the right direction, but the markers used do not embody value judgements in the same way as the choice of goals do. Benchmarks and mileposts tell you where you are or how far you have gone, not that you have reached your destination. That is the role of goalposts, of socially defined standards.

68. **Standards.** A significant task for the Select Committee must be to review what evaluative standards should be used by the UK to identify and measure child poverty, once it has decided what child poverty is. All the references to human dignity and decency in levels of living, to participation in society, to socially defined levels of well-being, or to adequacy or sufficiency of incomes and other essential resources, have to be turned from abstract expressions of values into concrete expressions of what they mean in the UK at this time.

69. The fundamental question is *whose* standards? Are they to be the standards which satisfy the government, whether or not they are credible to the UK population as a whole, or are they to be society's own standards whether or not the government find them politically congenial? Are they to be stratified socially or the same for all those in the UK?

70. **Stratification.** The critical distinction between sources of judgement standards ever since poverty studies started in the UK at the end of the 19th century has been between standards imposed or prescribed by the ruling classes ('good enough for the poor') and standards derived from scientific research into what the population itself judged to be poverty and adequacy ('good enough for us all'). The fact that UK governments have never welcomed the scientific findings of research into society's own poverty standards cannot be used as an infeasible argument against recognising that they exist and have more justification for use than the exigencies of the government's budgetary or labour market policies. What is needed to avoid poverty has often been inexcusably confused with, and obscured beneath, government claims about what can be afforded. They are not the same.

71. If the standards are to be those of the UK population as a whole, then the government must take steps to find out what they are. If the government fails to do this, then it risks discrediting the whole enterprise of 'abolishing child poverty' if it is later found that deprivations persist which the population experience as poverty even if the DWP says it has been abolished. Instead, the Select Committee should recommend what the Council of the European Community recommended in 1992, that the government should find out what amount of resources were needed to respect human dignity as the UK population defines it.³⁰ The technicalities of the research may be complicated but are not difficult and the Select Committee will no doubt receive proposals, as the DWP should from its expert panel of advisers.

72. The Select Committee will want to examine the status of the standards to be embodied in any child poverty measure, to see if they are those which research finds are held by UK society, or those chosen by government for political reasons, and to express clearly which view it takes.

73. **Measures, absolute and relative.** The DWP refers to the statistical HBAI measure of income inequality as a relative measure, as if using the adjective 'relative' would attract support from those who condemn absolute and commend relative measures of poverty. In

³⁰ Council Recommendation of 24 June 1992 on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection schemes, 92/441/EEC (also known as the Minimum Income Recommendations).

fact it is impossible for any measures not to be relative, except perhaps for absolute measures of temperature. All social measures are relative to social context, time, place and observer, and this applies with equal force to all conceivable measures of poverty. The only meaningful question is 'relative to what?'

74. The government wants measures which will show what movements have taken place over time since some arbitrary starting point (such as the HBAI statistics in 1997-98) by comparison with the standards effective at the starting date and the standards operative at present. It calls the first of these absolute and the second relative. This is a confusing and unusual use of terms and they should be avoided. It also wants statistical series which will allow both of these comparisons over time. Both can be achieved by governmental minimum income standards measures of the kind outlined above, provided the anachronism of comparing current poverty with past standards is admitted and once the appropriate recalculations are made to allow for periodic changes in the composition of the component base of comparison and more frequent changes in the price of the components.

75. It would help the debate if the Select Committee were to avoid describing inequality measures as if they were the only relative poverty measures available, and would distinguish poverty measures not by whether they seemed absolute or relative but by whether they were derived from scientific research, or from official prescriptions based on political expediency.

Conclusion.

76. The Select Committee wants to be able to recommend the way in which the UK government should go about setting a standard for child poverty and using it in a measure to identify and count the number of children in poverty by that standard. In this submission I have tried to explain a number of the contentious issues which arise in any attempt to find or set standards or devise measures. The contention arises at all levels from the conceptualisation of the problem through to the technicalities of the implementation.

77. Some of what I have put before the Select Committee might not have been needed if the DWP had not itself published a consultation document on the subject and a report on its preliminary conclusions. Both of these official documents usefully reflect the current official understanding and approach to these questions, but they are regrettably so filled with confusions between scientific analysis and presentational expediences, as well as with misunderstandings of research and methodological issues in this field, that they cannot be treated by the Select Committee as any basis for further action at present.

78. Instead, the issues in this paper will inevitably arise in any deliberations on which approach to use. Since the Select Committee is not bound by political expediency as the DWP is, but only by what can feasibly be done by all democratic governments to monitor and abolish child poverty, I hope that they will be useful to the Select Committee in making its recommendations.

APPENDIX A.

<p>RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS CONSULTATION ON CHILD POVERTY MEASUREMENT, JULY 2002.</p>
--

NOTE: The answers follow the numbers in the printed response form.

(iv) Experience of child poverty and measurement.

My experience of child poverty is both personal (in childhood) and academic. I have been engaged in research since 1964 into poverty concepts, definitions and measures, and into government responses to them in their income maintenance systems, particularly social

assistance. I have studied the UK government's policies on these matters from the 1930s onwards, based on primary sources in departmental files and interviews with senior officials, and have published the only account so far of the unique official study of the adequacy of the benefit rates (1999a). Following the suggestion of the Social Security Advisory Committee in 1991, I have also reported on how the governments of ten other countries around the world consider the adequacy of their income maintenance benefits and set governmental minimum income standards (1998). My work emphasises the distinction between political and scientific objectives, methods and measures, a distinction which is not mentioned in the consultation document but which is especially relevant to it.

Relevant publications.

- J. Veit-Wilson (1989), "The Concept of Minimum Income and the Basis of Income Support." In: House of Commons Social Services Committee, *Minimum Income: Memoranda laid before the Committee*, House of Commons Paper 579, HMSO, London, pp 74-95. (NB: many misprints!)
- J. Veit-Wilson (1992), "Muddle or Mendacity? The Beveridge Committee and the Poverty Line." *Journal of Social Policy*, 21(3), pp. 269-301.
- J. Veit-Wilson (1994), "Condemned to Deprivation? Beveridge's Responsibility for the Invisibility of Poverty." Ch 7 in: J. Hills; J. Ditch and H. Glennerster (eds), *Beveridge and Social Security: An International Retrospective*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- J. Veit-Wilson (1998), *Setting adequacy standards: How governments define minimum incomes*. The Policy Press, Bristol. ISBN 1-86134-072-9
- J. Veit-Wilson (1999a), "The National Assistance Board and the 'Rediscovery' of Poverty." In: H Fawcett and R Lowe (eds), *Welfare Policy in Britain: The Road from 1945*, Macmillan, London, pp 116-157.
- J. Veit-Wilson (1999b), "The Tax Threshold: Policy, Principles and Poverty." *Twentieth Century British History*, 10/2, 218-234.
- J. Veit-Wilson (1999c), "Poverty and the adequacy of social security." In: J Ditch (ed), *Introduction to Social Security: Policies, benefits and poverty*. Routledge, London. pp 78-109.
- J. Veit-Wilson (2001a), "Triangulation of Data from Existing Sources as a Basis for a Governmental Minimum Income Standard." In: House of Commons Social Security Committee, *Integrated Child Credit*, House of Commons Paper HC 72, The Stationery Office, London, pp 109-126.
- J. Veit-Wilson (2001b) "Concepts and Measures." Chapter 1 in: M Howard, A Garnham, G Fimister and J Veit-Wilson, *Poverty: The Facts (4th Edition)*, Child Poverty Action Group, London, pp 12-28.

Introduction: general issues.

Two different interpretations of the consultation question must be distinguished before the issues in the document can be addressed, (a) and (b).

1. (a) The question, 'how should child poverty be measured?' evokes two disparate kinds of answers. One is the answer to the question, 'by what measure can you capture all the multifarious qualities of child poverty?'. The other is 'by what measure can you count how many people are in poverty?' These are completely different questions, but if the government is to make effective policy it is essential that it can distinguish between the answers.

2. The Prime Minister promised to abolish child poverty by 2019. This requires an answer to the second question. The implications of this distinction between what are essentially issues for social science and what are essentially political issues are discussed below. Many people respond to the question in this very welcome consultation by addressing issues around a better understanding of the wide variety of concepts, definitions and approaches to child poverty, and the variety of qualitative and quantitative measures to which each approach gives rise. By contrast, my response focuses chiefly on the second question. I am just as interested in the first question, but I do not believe it is the salient issue in this consultation.

3. (b) Many consultants and respondents advise that the government retains the HBAI measure of the distributive inequality of household incomes as the chief (or significant) measure of child poverty. This confuses the political importance of inequality in the UK (and the demands for greater redistribution to reduce it) with the need to establish what are minimally adequate household income levels at which the many qualities of poverty can be overcome. These are two entirely distinct concepts and measures which should not be confused with each other.

4. The government should continue to collect data on income inequality, but if it does no more than this it risks never being able to abolish child poverty, because it has no means of knowing what level of incomes and other essential resources are needed to overcome it, or of taking steps to ensure that all children have access to them. If the government aims to achieve its poverty abolition target, income inequality statistics can never be a substitute for the indispensable collection of reliable statistics on the adequacy of incomes and their distribution. This issue is discussed further below.

(1) What aspects should be captured in a long-term measure?

5. There are as many aspects as the definition of child poverty chosen. The government must decide how broad its definition is to be and measure all aspects of it. The broader the definition, the more aspects have to be measured; the narrower the definition, the fewer. Note that all authorities agree that child poverty cannot be measured independently of the situation of the family or household in which they are living. The poverty of a child can be understood separately from that of its family or household, but for practical measurement purposes (under the present conditions of household resource dynamics and data collection) the poverty of children has to be subsumed under that of its household.

Condition or resources?

6. The usual meaning of poverty is **a lack of sufficient resources** to 'buy' oneself and one's dependants out of a host of deprivations and exclusions and into full social participation. For the government's counting purposes, it may be enough to measure those resources – chiefly cash flows and other assets which can be converted into cash flows.

7. On the other hand, if the government's preferred definition means **the social condition** of being poor, including a broad sweep of deprivations and exclusions and not only power over fungible resources such as cash incomes, then they must all be precisely delineated and measured. The government is concerned about a wide range of social evils described in *Opportunity for All* and should work to abolish them as well. But they are not all aspects of poverty in any of the usual meanings of the word. Credibility will be lost if the target is so diffuse, and it will be much harder to achieve.

8. In either case it is essential to have empirically well-founded measures of how much is needed, whether of resources to achieve a satisfactory condition, or of the qualities of that condition. For example, if the government believes that parents without employment, low levels of children's school attainment or health inequalities should be included as conditions of child poverty, then in order to set its targets and measure achievement it must be able to answer such questions as, how little worklessness is enough, what educational attainment is not poverty, what health inequalities are tolerable and to whom?

9. Similarly, the document states that "Low income is a key aspect of child poverty" (para 14), and the government minister and officials at the consultation workshop in London on 20 June reiterated that low income is the single most important aspect of poverty and is seen as a key issue. This view was supported and reinforced by Professor John Hills and others there. However, it must be noted that 'low income' as such need not be a deprivation or the cause of deprivations, *provided that* at its lowest it is still enough for what society defines as adequacy for decent performance and participation. Income is *the* indispensable mediating resource for avoiding the bad conditions of deprivations and social evils and getting out of poverty, but a measurement of income level tells us nothing if we do not know if it is

adequate for social inclusion and thus its purpose of measuring poverty (at income levels below it).

10. The document states that "Action to tackle child poverty must therefore raise the incomes of the poorest families" (para 18), but to what level? Only social science, not politics, can answer this question. In every field the UK government sets quantified measurable targets, except for income. Since low income is ineradicable (there must always be some level of income which is lower than some other), measuring income distribution cannot be a measure of poverty. The government must therefore discover what level of low income is sufficient to abolish child poverty.

Political or scientific objectives?

11. Which aspects of poverty should be measured also depends on whether one has political or scientific objectives. A social science approach would suggest that research must discover empirically how UK society defines and experiences poverty and the associated forms of deprivation and social exclusion. It would also study such questions as human rights and other relevant value systems which might shed another light on UK society's approach to poverty, as well as reviewing expert evidence on physiological and psychological needs and the resources and environments which supply them adequately within the parameters set by UK social convention and current scientific knowledge of human development in time and place. Examination of this collected qualitative and quantitative data would allow the development of indicators and measures relevant to the forms of child poverty which international values and UK society recognise.

12. In the UK these would include measures of the quality of family life and of its social, psychological and physical security, of housing and its environment, of socialisation and education from birth, of the conditions of life and work of parents or carers. The measures would include not only the 'output' measures of achievement of the variety of norms of conventional experience and performance which society sets, but also of power over the *resources* available to the families, both collective and individual, tangible and intangible, which allow those norms to be achieved. Among the most important individual and tangible resources in a marketised economy such as that of the UK is income – the family's or household's discretionary purchasing power. Other measures (such as expenditure) may capture what the family has achieved, but only the purchasing power at its disposal measures what it *can do*, and what choices it has the power to make, in those aspects of life where money is relevant.

13. A satisfactory scientific measure of poverty is one where empirical research would be able to show how far the deprivations and social evils it embraces are being experienced, and by whom and where. **From a scientific perspective, poverty is not abolished until the evidence shows that no one is poor by this empirically derived social definition, irrespective of the political or financial implications.** Similarly, the resources found by such intensive research methods to be needed to abolish this poverty are matters entirely for scientific determination, even if government is unwilling or unable to supply them. Previous governments' claims that implementing policies to deal with scientific findings about poverty levels was 'too expensive' is not an objection to their integrity but is a confusion between scientific and political objectives.

14. The political objective is quite different. What that objective is may vary, but its specific form relates very directly to the aims of any specified government. In this case, the New Labour government has promised to halve child poverty by 2010 and to abolish it by 2019. As Baroness Hollis has recently stated –

We need ... to arrive at a measurement of poverty that is transparent, robust and holds government to account, and, in turn, gives government proper policy levers in order to take action. (House of Lords, 3 July 2002, col 218)

15. The answer to the first consultation question is, then, that if the government's objective as stated here is to be met, it must capture each aspect of poverty at issue in a

discrete measure (transparent and robust, and meeting the document's requirement that "if policies are working, there should be an improvement in the indicator"). These measures, and the standards on which they are based, must be drawn from the scientific research and not from political prescription, since the latter lacks public credibility based on human experience.

16. In addition, the choice of measures and indicators needs to be based on an analytical understanding of the chain of necessary resources and intermediate goals towards the final objective. Which of these are inputs and which are outputs? That can be answered only by analysis of the whole chain – no single factor is an input or output, a resource or a condition alone.

(2) The criteria of a good indicator.

17. Because of the confusion between scientific and political objectives, the document discusses indicators as if this were a scientific matter, when what in fact became clear in the consultation workshop on 20 June was that the government objective is the search for a political measure, amenable to policy (as Baroness Hollis reiterated, quoted above) which can literally be headlined in the media.

18. The consultation document quotes Professor Sir Tony Atkinson's report to the EU on social indicators. The nine principles and four recommendations in his chapter 2 were written to offer diagnostic tools for EU comparative and indicative purposes. This is not the same objective as the DWP desire for measures which will show if the UK government has managed to reduce or abolish what it defines as child poverty. Naturally, the UK government should measure everything needed to generate internationally comparable data, with long term series, disaggregable and so on, including income inequalities. This is a both/and question, not an either/or. The real issue here is, what are good indicators of child poverty which are both publicly credible and unambiguous as well as scientifically robust, for use in the UK over two decades?

19. The document also considers that a good indicator will reflect child outcomes rather than processes, giving as an example children in workless households rather than DWP policy achievements in employment placements. But to be workless is not necessarily to be poor, and lacking work is not synonymous with poverty. Examination of the range of households shows that there are rich households in which no adult is in employment, but the children are not in poverty as a result. The real issue is of course not the employment status of parents if they have adequate incomes from assets, but that in the absence of assets unemployment is likely to cause loss of adequate income. Similarly, there are many households in which adults have employment but do not earn adequate incomes. How are they to be measured? The idea that employment (not work, which everyone does, unpaid if not paid) is the salient *poverty* issue when in fact it is adequate income, is a conceptual confusion (unemployment is of course both a social and a political issue for other reasons). The outcomes for children certainly should be measured, but the policy implications of deprivations and shortfalls are that the inputs are insufficient to achieve the government's output goals – and that means, among other things, measuring the adequacy of incomes, in employment as well as out of it.

20. To say that a good indicator "should be readily summarised" does not require that a multi-faceted set of indicators should be collapsible into a single score or headline. As Sir Tony Atkinson and his colleagues wisely remark, "We have also to be aware of the temptation to aggregate indicators. Journalists writing about trends will tend to count pluses and minuses" (2002 p 25). Conversely, a measure or indicator which – perhaps because of its technical intricacy and robustness – manages to persuade the media and public figures that it reflects child poverty might therefore meet the political objective, but might be totally unsatisfactory for the scientific purposes of monitoring whether government policy achieves its objectives.

21. A current example in the income field is the use of statistical measures of income inequality as substitutes for measures of income adequacy. There is no evidence that 60% of equivalised median household incomes is enough, too much or too little for families to buy themselves out of poverty. There is some dated evidence that it is too little. Research could be carried out to find the current point on the income distribution scale at which (equivalised) households do, on average, manage to avoid the deprivations and social evils. Other research could discover, using budget methods, what level of living was affordable at 60% of median incomes, to see if that level of living avoided or reinforced the deprivations and social evils. But such research has not yet been done.

22. Like low income or worklessness, some of the other indicators the government mentions, such as education, are not *in themselves* indicators of poverty. What the government implicitly means is that, for instance, better educational qualifications may lead to – but do not guarantee – higher paid jobs in the labour market. Once again the subject is money as the means in the chain of resources to meet ends, which themselves become resources for a further objective (a better condition of life), not about education as such.

Public credibility?

23. Measures and their indicators must be (the document states) 'credible with the public'. It does not state which salient public this is, but it clearly must include the media and politicians. It is not clear how far either of these articulate but often uninformed groups of the public outweigh the opinions of the often inarticulate but well-informed sections of the public who experience deprivations, exclusions and social evils at first hand.

24. Professor Hills is quoted as demanding four kinds of credibility for indicators – political, policy, public and technical – and Fran Bennett (at the consultation workshop, London, 20 June 2001) added credibility with people in poverty. This set is similar to the US National Academy of Sciences' recommendation that the US governmental minimum income standard (MIS) should be publicly acceptable, statistically defensible and operationally feasible (Citro and Michael 1995). The US measure is quoted in the document as 'the official poverty line', but this is a misnomer since it does not measure poverty empirically but instead prescribes a MIS, a political measure of income alleged to be sufficient for a prescribed minimum level of living.

25. The credibility of measures and indicators with two much larger sections of the public, apart from politicians and the media, is indispensable. One is the views of the public as a whole about what deprived conditions or lack of resources would not be acceptable *to them* if they had to experience them. The other is the views of the large minority of the public who actually experience the bad conditions and lack of resources. Only they know from experience what the salient conditions or key resource lacks are. A credible long term measure or indicator of child poverty must satisfy both of these publics. In both cases the crucial issue is not what anyone thinks is poverty for someone else, but what it actually is, or would be, for oneself.

26. My view of the criteria for indicators on page 19 is that the technical ones are acceptable, but the policy and achievement indicators need far more careful thought about the objectives to be achieved, and by which policies, than they seem to have had.

(3) Summary or headline measure of child poverty.

27. There are many very sophisticated technical fixes which may satisfy the technical methodological experts and some of the technical criteria but, because of the widespread confusion between scientific and political objectives, may be politically useless. Even the current usage of income inequality statistics always evokes from journalists the question, "yes, but what does 'an equivalised household income at 60 % of the median' actually *mean* in pounds per week?" This is the hard and unavoidable question which the government has got to be able to answer as long as it wants to use this kind of inequality low income statistic as a proxy headline indicator for poverty.

28. The question is, how can the UK government achieve public acceptability and credibility for any headline indicator of child poverty which is not based on a measure of adequate family income? The mass of sophisticated data the document refers to will not have credibility with the public if they do not include what the public sees as the key indicator. The *British Social Attitudes 18th Report* (Sage, 2001) shows that this is a money measure and not a host of multi-dimensional statistics (see Professor Hills's chapter 1 on "Poverty and Social Security: What rights? Whose responsibilities?"). And how can these criteria of good indicators be achieved to ensure the technical requirement that the indicator measures what it purports to measure, if the only income measure on offer is unequal income?

29. Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, has himself made it clear that he believes that the real issue is not income inequality alone but whether the lowest incomes are enough to enable people to get out of poverty. Repeatedly asked by Jeremy Paxman "is it acceptable for the gap between the rich and poor to get bigger?" (BBC Newsnight, 4 June 2001), Tony Blair repeatedly replied –

It is acceptable for those people on lower incomes to have their incomes raised. It is unacceptable that they are not given the chances. ... What I am saying is the issue isn't in fact whether the very richest person ends up becoming richer. The issue is whether the poorest person is given the chance that they don't otherwise have.

Reducing inequality is an important objective in the fight against poverty, but by concentrating on measuring only income inequality, the DWP is failing to act upon the Prime Minister's assertion that incomes adequate 'to give people chances' also have to be targeted. Clearly this cannot be at a level inadequate for a decent life. [Postscript September 2003: the Chancellor of the Exchequer told an IPPR conference that "equality of opportunity is not enough, fairness of outcome matters just as much". (Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian*, 10.9.03, p 22). An outcome leaving people in poverty cannot be considered to be fair.]

30. It really does not matter what I or any of the many technical and methodological experts think would make a good headline measure, as long as the UK public, and all the journalists who feed them, think of *the summary of poverty as being too little money to live on decently*. And as long as they all do, the government cannot meet its target without a household disposable income measure which (a) tells us what *science shows* is enough to live on in the UK to avoid all the deprivations and social evils the public as well as the government are concerned about, and (b) what proportion of the population are actually (not just statistically modelled) living below that level. That and that alone is the summary measure, the headline, which will be credible to the publics the government cares about.

31. While the government is right to be concerned about many dimensions of poverty, deprivation and exclusion, and it should measure them all, separately, so that it can analyse and target policy effectively, if it wants a single headline summary of child poverty, there is – in the public view – no substitute for a measure of adequate family income.

(4) The options on offer.

Option One. 32. The challenge of the criteria for an effective indicator would be met by the use of the governmental minimum income standard (MIS) as the headline measure, as in USA, showing (if it can be done) that the government had ensured that all families with children had permanent incomes from earnings and child benefits (including tax credits), or temporarily from augmented social security at a lower level, which were consistent with its MIS.

33. The many other dimensions of poverty are each separate experiences for the poor, and as such cannot be offset against each other. Experts such as John Micklewright and Professor Hills (in their papers to the DSS/CASE 19 July 2000 discussion of indicators, CASE Report 13) advise that clear and separate indicators should be used in the first place, and I agree with this opinion.

34. Each issue about which the government is concerned and which it sees as an aspect of child poverty should be clearly identified, and measured and reported on separately. That might be more than the five issues mentioned in the document, and it might be other issues. Further, the low income measure should not be an arbitrary percentile on a statistical income distribution but an empirically-derived measure of adequate income. Any judgements about aggregating the findings of empirical evidence should be made only by an independent commission of experts, for example triangulating data to set a governmental minimum income standard, not by politicians or officials.

Option Two. 35. The compositing of statistical scores from disparate dimensions of poverty would create endless controversy among experts and be publicly incomprehensible, because it leads to and reflects confusion between scientific and political objectives.

36. Whatever may be useful as a development index in UN comparison circles, this has nothing to do in political terms with satisfying the UK media or public that poverty is being or has been abolished, if people still feel that their incomes are insufficient and the government cannot show that each of the income-related deprivations or social evils has been abolished.

Option Three. 37. Option three is another confusion between technical fix and social realities – and a diversion from the political objective. Having a relatively unequal income and suffering from socially-defined deprivations are doubtlessly bad and worth reporting, but the government will not be believed if it tries to convince the public that people are not poor because they do not have both characteristics in this measure even while they still suffer many deprivations.

38. The Irish Government's *Final Report of the Social Welfare Benchmarking and Indexation Group* (Dublin 2001) examined this (Irish) proposal at length to evaluate its usefulness. It reported the criticisms that the validity of the measure was highly dependent on the topicality of the deprivation indicators included (the Irish indicators had been unchanged for 14 years); that it identified "a specific group of people with a particular experience of poverty, (but) does not identify all those who are poor; (and) it simply distinguishes between the very poor and the poor, *a distinction that tends to lead in practice to a situation where the poor receive far less priority than is required if their situation is to be tackled*" (p70; emphasis added). Such criticism needs to be taken seriously.

39. The UK government did not promise to abolish a poverty based on such an incomplete and misleading artificial construct, but to abolish child poverty as measured across a range of aspects. This option does not begin to address that problem and it will have no political credibility.

Option Four. 40. Professor Hills is quoted as offering a set of statistical indicators which measure income inequalities over time, together with the Irish measure (above). This option may help the government to see how far it has come, and will be of interest to historians, but it is questionable if stationary 'absolute' statistical measures of income dispersion will help the government to achieve its goals. No government would dare to claim that it had abolished poverty by a 20-year-old outdated standard rather than by the current standard.

41. The credibility question is not whether economists or historians can see government progress using an unchanged real measure, but whether the electorate and the media think that child poverty, the poverty of families with dependent children, has been abolished in 2019 or not, using the standards appropriate to 2019.

42. Even the so-called 'relative' measure (actually, *all* conceivable measures are relative) of 60% HBAI remains merely a measure of income inequality, and compositing it together with measures of employment, education, health and housing will not answer the eternal public questions of 'is that enough to live on?' and 'has everyone got an income up to that level?'. The dangers of using inappropriate standards for making political claims about poverty reduction have already been revealed in recent months, and government credibility risks being undermined by a repetition such as this option offers.

(5) Favoured factors and criteria for a child poverty measure.

43. The approach I favour for measuring child poverty to meet political objectives and criteria is a modified form of option 1 (distinct and separate empirically-based measures for each salient deprivation issue), with the income adequacy measure based on the construction and use of governmental minimum income standards (MIS) for the UK, as is done in at least ten other countries including USA (see Veit-Wilson 1998) as the headline summary indicator.

44. The government needs (but currently lacks) independent advice at arms-length to ensure the public credibility of any child poverty measure it wants to use. It needs experts to evaluate the scientific evidence and set standards to enable well-founded child poverty measurements to be carried out. It also needs them for better and effective policy making. The Social Security Committee recommended last year that the government should fund a range of research into "the levels of income which are sufficient to keep families with children out of poverty", and set up an "ongoing working party" of experts to help the government "devise publicly acceptable measures of the levels of income needed to avoid poverty" (HC72, 2001, paras 24 and 25). Such work would be done on the basis of examining the many disparate sources of information about the adequacy of incomes to meet a variety of needs and avoid a range of deprivations and social evils, such as those the government is concerned to abolish. Since the information collected will not 'agree' on any one income level, the method of evaluation to be used should include 'triangulating' the various findings, so that a range of conclusions becomes apparent – a tiered set of incomes at which various deprivations and social evils are shown to be avoided.

45. The political fear that any such triangulated and synthesised findings about family income adequacy levels might show up the inadequacy of current UK income maintenance systems – not only pensions and Income Support but also minimum wage rates – need no longer be operative, now that the battery of tax credit benefits to be brought into operation will taper so high up the income scale. Governments who feel vulnerable to criticism may better be able to calculate and point out, if they have to, that (for instance) while an earner's full time minimum wage on its own may be below some household adequacy level, taken together with tax credits and other benefits a measure of family income adequacy may be achieved. A major political objection to the recommendations made by the Social Security Committee can thus be removed. It is also worth noting that the US government's MIS is well above the incomes offered by many Federal and State agencies, but this does not create political problems there of the kind feared here.

46. Political and public credibility are indispensable criteria of MIS, and the countries which have them therefore usually make use of some form of empirical evidence on adequacy for a desired level of living, depending on the national political culture. In the UK this culture demands scientific support for such assertions (in some others, widespread political participative consensus may be sufficient, but that does not apply in the UK). The MIS are then used as a basis for evaluating the income maintenance tiers, from minimum wages at the top, via tax thresholds to long-term social security benefits and short term social assistance. The MIS are not universally set at the level of any one of these four tiers – in some countries the minimum wage is the MIS and other benefits are set (usually) below this level, while in others the standard is lower and other parts of the system may be above or below it. Deciding on benefit levels is a different activity.

47. What the government needs in order to set a MIS for families with children for use as a measure of child poverty abolition is therefore the best data and the means to evaluate it. In a vast range of scientific and specialised fields of government interest and activity it has always made use of expert advisers, working parties and advisory committees to evaluate the findings of scientific research, to come to conclusions about it and to advise government on action. The scientific evaluation, judgement and synthesis of conclusions are matters for the experts, while the political implications of the conclusions are matters for government. If even HM Treasury can hand over critical interest rate decisions to the Monetary Policy

Committee (an action unthinkable until this government did it), the longstanding idea that the setting of MIS could not be given to a similarly independent committee can no longer carry any weight.

48. All UK governments have argued against using empirical findings about income inadequacy in policy making 'because the findings of the various scientific studies do not agree with each other'. This oft-repeated ministerial statement is based on a confusion. The factors which may arguably be political issues in setting benefit levels, such as relationships with other parts of the income maintenance system or the Treasury costs, are not relevant to the process of evaluating such empirical findings about poverty and establishing a MIS.

49. The often overlooked point is that a standard is simply a yardstick and not a determinant, and a MIS refers to an income level or levels which are believed to give access to a desired level of living which is being taken as the criterion for comparison of other levels of living. This MIS might be set higher than the lowest acceptable incomes because it may, for example, be based on the higher minimum needs of some sections of the population such as families with children, or at long-term rather than short term levels of living.

(6) Geographical coverage.

50. The question of regional or other spatial variation in standards for poverty measures is extremely complicated. What does the government want to know about measurement for policy purposes? There are several distinct questions here. Is it whether the poverty measure should vary from one area to another because of differences in the costs of maintaining the same minimum standard of living? Or is it how many children are poor in one area or another using a common measure? And if a common measure is used, is it a common income level (at which different levels of living can be afforded) or a common outcome level of living (which need varying income levels to achieve them)?

51. Since the 1930s, some studies have found at some times that rural life is cheaper than urban, and some that the reverse holds. Other studies have found that the currently poor are more mixed into the currently non-poor population in all areas than differentiated between them (the Plowden paradox augmented by the findings of dynamic poverty research). The debate has often been confused between these different issues.

52. The empirical evidence may well be that there is a spatially differentiated range of scientific poverty lines (incomes needed to meet a minimum participation level of living in different places and under varying conditions). However, the policy implications are again a separate matter: it does not follow that a UK government must adopt each or any of them as spatially differentiated political MIS, nor as differentiated income maintenance benefits. Whether specific income maintenance provisions should vary was faced and considered by previous governments or officials in 1935 (Unemployment Assistance) and 1942 (Beveridge Report), and both finally came out against differentiation. Governments need to distinguish precisely what the income maintenance policy issues are with which they aim to deal, but these are not the focus of this consultation on child poverty measurement.

Conclusion.

53. Option 1, amended as suggested above, offers the best chance of reflecting the realities of the variety of dimensions of poverty including spatial variation, since each of the outcome measures chosen will be shown separately. Within it, the income resource measure can best be dealt with pragmatically by the recommended expert advisory committee taking each of the sources of empirical evidence which it will be triangulating in order to set a MIS and also examining it in the light of spatial differentiation, and if it varies, how, over what areas and to what extent. It could in theory be possible that this would provide a basis for a spatially variable MIS to maintain a common minimally adequate level of living across the UK (especially if the MIS were to include widely variable housing costs), or a single MIS with local variable additional allowances. The headline poverty abolition target to aim for would be 'all children live in households with the same minimally acceptable participatory level of

living, and all households with children have the incomes needed to achieve that target of poverty abolition'.

54. In this way, the government's objectives can be met – of seeing poverty more broadly than income alone, but of recognising income's key importance in achieving desired outcomes and being accepted as a headline indicator. Further, the total picture available to the government of child poverty, including income and outcome variation, would be richer and more informative using this version of option 1 than through the use of any of the composited proposals in the other three options, all of which risk obscuring the complex variations either of aspects of life or of area.

APPENDIX B.

Science or politics in poverty problem definition and response: the policy formulation challenge.

1. The UK government has repeatedly stated that it cannot try to find a scientifically reliable basis for income poverty measures or governmental minimum income standards because 'the experts do not agree'. That is because the experts have not been asked to pool their expertise in the solution of a common problem. Instead, governments have consulted them each individually as experts in their own fields and then non-scientific officials try to synthesise their advice in politically-expedient ways, as the DWP's reports show. If the government adopted the Select Committee's previous recommendation to sponsor research to enable expert judgement on triangulation to take place, it might find the reliable scientific agreement it seeks. The Select Committee should repeat this advice. We must also hope that the DWP's newly appointed panel of expert advisers will be able to act collectively to find agreement on the measures to adopt.

2. The Select Committee is itself expert in the political objectives of policy research and implementation and will well understand how these differ from those of science. The audiences for political solutions to problems are quite different from those for scientific problems, and they want different kinds of answers. The DWP rightly says that the choice of poverty measure must be publicly credible, but which public does it have in mind? The media are the most salient publics for most political purposes, together with the sections of the electorate to be retained or attracted. It is the media who are the prime customers for the headline measures of child poverty which the DWP wants, but the simplicity of a headline is incompatible with the complex findings of science, hedged around by reservations and qualifications as they are. We constantly see this in the media presentation of natural science findings and it is even more true in the fields of social science.

3.. Poverty is conceptualised by the whole of society as a lack of welfare by its common standards. The rich can say 'I would be poor if ...' and the poor can reply that they are poor by that definition. Those who know most about what poverty means in their daily lives – people on low incomes – are unlikely to find credible the government's adoption of an assumed income measure which implies that if they have incomes above that level but are still poor as society sees it, their deprivations must be their own fault ('blaming the victim') and not the fault of the government which has failed to ensure that they have adequate incomes. This is the likely outcome of the adoption of an arbitrary statistical assumption about income inequality as the official measure of income adequacy, or indeed any measure which has not been tested by thorough research which provides reliable evidence of what the population as a whole take it to mean.

4. There are many current examples of the difference between the requirements of government scientific advice and of government policy making in the public eye and this is one of them. There are inherent conflicts in both aims and methods which bedevil this debate. When the Select Committee deliberates over 'what is evidence?' it must distinguish

their approaches. The issue is not idealistic differences but practical constraints of aims and methods. The problems include disciplinary differences in problem identification, conflicts of expert advice, and incompatibility with political objectives.

5. Social scientists are being asked to offer advice on how to measure the social phenomenon of poverty. Some are experts on the variety of styles of living in society, including those which are socially defined as unacceptable. Some are expert in measuring the distribution of resources of many kinds, but without necessarily being experts in what resources or how much of them are needed to avoid certain styles of life. Some are experts in the inputs (such as nutrition and socialisation) and the outcomes (such as education and health) which may themselves be taken as causes, conditions or consequences of the dynamics of poverty and which are publicly seen as social ills or evils. Other branches of scientific expertise are of course also involved.

6. What should be common to them is a commitment to scientific method: the use of their disciplines' expert knowledge and skills to study and produce findings which are recognised as having integrity *in terms of the paradigms and assumptions of their scientific discipline and branch of expertise*. Unfortunately, each discipline may have the competence to study only some part of the whole problem³¹ as the politicians have identified it, even though some of its practitioners have to incorporate assumptions from other fields in order to carry out their own work.

7. In the field of poverty studies, the chief example of this conflict is between (a) those social scientists who study the social realities of deprivations etc and from them arrive at the hard formulations of the definition of poverty and the measures relevant to that definition, and (b) those social scientists who make an assumption that poverty is what they say it is, and then formulate their definition and measures on the basis of their prior prescription. Either society defines poverty, and the income poverty line then is a statistical derivative of social definitions, or the statistician *assumes* that a certain percentage of average incomes is to be taken as a proxy for this, whether the evidence shows that it is reliable or not. There is no bridge between the two approaches: they are in conflict in terms of the source of *authority* for their claims that poverty is one thing or another. One judges on the basis of evidence, the other on the basis of formal theoretical systems.

8. We can joke about Humpty Dumpty insisting that words mean what he wants them to mean, whether or not that is the customary shared meaning in common usage, and about the shipwrecked economist who solves the problem of how to open a tin of food by assuming that he has a tin opener. But the problem of child poverty and its consequences is far too serious for jokes. **Poverty does not mean what politicians and officials want it to mean; it means what the society in which it occurs customarily takes it to mean.** Similarly, poverty does not occur at the percentage of the income distribution which the statistician takes as the formal assumption for the purpose of the national HBAI statistics; it is found where incomes are too low to prevent it according to the definition of poverty which society holds. Making formal assumptions is simply irrelevant to finding out what poverty is and who is in it. Thus measuring the inequality of incomes by statistical methods is socially valuable, but telling us that the poverty line is at 60 per cent of median household incomes is a mere formal assumption which has no social value at all.

9. The role of social statisticians is absolutely indispensable in the calculations which translate the findings of the social research into how a society defines and identifies poverty and deprivation into the data with which comparisons of all kinds can be made and policies formulated. But the only way of discovering what society as a whole understands by the *meaning* of poverty is to carry out social research on the whole population, and that is the expertise of applied forms of the disciplines of sociology and psychology. Why not economics? Because economics (as a discipline – I am not referring to the admirable

³¹ As in the story of the committee of blind men describing an elephant by each feeling one part of it, a trunk, a leg, an ear and so on. Pity the poor officials who, being unfamiliar with an elephant, have to draw it from such partial descriptions, where the political requirement is an animal stronger than a horse.

abilities of some of the people who practice it) has not got the conceptual tools to articulate and analyse human values, meanings and motives, and in their absence the evaluative concept of poverty ('this is an *unacceptable* level of welfare') cannot be understood.

10. The interdisciplinary research of using both qualitative sociological and quantitative statistical methods to discover at what percentage of average incomes people in UK society do not experience what UK society defines as poverty has not yet been done by government, but it could and should be.³² This data would then form a significant part of the collection of evidence about the relation between resources and deprivations (including ill-health and other adverse life experiences) which the government's experts should triangulate to work towards setting governmental minimum income standards for the UK.

11. Many of the submissions which the Select Committee receives will support the government continuing to collect and publish the income inequality statistics. But in some cases this is not because their authors believe that HBAI is the ideal method of measuring poverty, but because these statistics should be published in their own right, and until there are evidence based poverty measures, the inequality statistics are the only substitute available.

12. The Select Committee will greatly help the debate by distinguishing clearly and explicitly between scientific and political approaches to the measurement and policy questions.

³² And if it is not done by government researchers, then government should fund independent research institutes to carry it out.