

Ryan Bourne: If you want to feed hungry children, don't target food poverty. Aim to reduce poverty as a whole.

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Covid-19's initial economic impact fell disproportionately on those least able to mitigate it. An Institute for Fiscal Studies [paper in July](#) found that single parents, low educated poor households, and ethnic minority groups suffered the worst relative hit. Since then, workers in low-wage services industries such as hospitality, transport, and retail, have faced both the worst of unexpected job losses and uncertainty about their income.

With this unique shock, it is unsurprising that a welfare state built around previous experiences has exhibited failures in protecting against hardship. Falling incomes, especially for those without savings or access to government benefits, have consequences. [The Food Standards Agency reports](#) greater food bank use, self-reported hunger, and families eating out-of-date produce.

That context is why the Government faces intense pressure over extending free school meals during school holidays through Easter 2021. Given the uncertainty around the efficacy of other government support, you can see the temptation to follow the advice of Iain Martin, who proposes caving to Marcus Rashford's campaign again. Give the "£20m, handshake with Marcus R on steps of Number 10 on Monday and Royal Commission into child poverty," [Martin tweeted](#).

That defeat might seem a small price to pay to end the optics of opposing meals for hungry children, regardless of any questions you might have about the realities, or the desirability of extending the government scheme. As Isabel Hardman [writes](#), the belief that Conservatives are insensitive to "food poverty," coming first in righteous anger over food bank use in 2010-2015 and now "free" school meals, has hung around the Conservatives for a decade, whether fair or not.

Martin's short-term solution, however, neglects that campaigners won't be satiated by extending out-of-term meal vouchers to Easter 2021. Rashford's campaign's ultimate aim, remember, is to implement the [Dimbleby Review](#), which would double the number of kids on benefit-triggered free school meals by extending eligibility to every child from a Universal Credit household (an extra 1.5 million kids.)

Crossbench peer Baroness D'Souza is already pushing for out-of-term meal vouchers to become a permanent feature. Combined, that would be billions of pounds, year on year, not tens of millions.

Come next year, no matter the labour market's health, the Government will face the same criticism. If much of austerity taught us anything, it's that even when acute need passes, wrapping up programmes will renew accusations that Conservatives "want to starve kids" by "snatching" their lunches.

Milton Friedman's warning that "there's nothing more permanent than a temporary government programme," in part stems from recipients' aversion to losses. A Royal Commission packed with do-gooders who examine food poverty in isolation will bring further demands for spending and diet control.

That is why, I suspect, some Conservative MPs vociferously oppose the Rashford campaign. It's not heartlessness, or even this specific extension they oppose, but the precedent and direction of travel. They can foresee the vision of government this type of reflexive policymaking and its paternalistic particulars end with.

The problem for them is that they are on a hiding to nothing in claiming this specific measure risks creating longer-term "dependency" or "nationalising children" if the public think today's needs are real. Conservatives who believe in a small, limited state have to have answers—about what responsibility the Government should have in dealing with hardship, what tools it should use, and what its role should be for those falling through gaps.

After ten years in government and riding cycles of support for the welfare state, there's a lack of clarity in the Party's position, with a mix of preferences among its MPs for income support, service provision, civil society solutions, and combinations of the three. There is a clear, principled alternative vision of how to deal with poverty if the Tories want it. But it requires getting off the fence.

That alternative would say that "food poverty" is not distinct from poverty. Free school meal campaigners are broadly right that hunger is not usually caused by parental fecklessness.

Therefore, logically, food poverty largely results from insufficient disposable income for some families. If widespread hunger is evidenced, the debate should therefore be about whether benefit levels or eligibility are sufficient to meet basic needs—the goal of a safety net welfare state.

This type of limited support that trusts people to use top-ups for the betterment of their families is vastly preferable to a paternalistic state stripping us of responsibility, through demeaning out-of-term food vouchers akin to U.S. style food stamps.

In deep unexpected crises, the case for additional emergency income relief is greater. But if there really is a more structural problem of hunger, then it demands examining why wages plus benefits are insufficient to deliver acceptable living standards. Rather than just look at benefits then, we should examine living costs, too—the poor spend disproportionately high amounts on housing, energy, food, clothing and footwear, and transport.

My former colleague Kristian Niemietz wrote a free-market anti-poverty agenda back in 2011, which I've pushed MPs to adopt since. He showed that market-friendly policies on housing (planning reform), food and clothes (free trade), energy (ending high-cost green regulations), childcare (reversing the credentialism and stringent ratios), and cutting sin taxes to economically-justified levels could shrink poverty by slashing the cost of living for the poor, so reducing food hardship, homelessness and more.

Most of this agenda would require no extra spending or busyboding from government paternalists; some of the policies would bring the double-dividend of raising wages .

The Government has ambitious policies in a number of these areas. But why are they never linked to the poverty discussions? As they press for planning liberalisation, why is nobody highlighting how cheaper housing would lessen these tales of distress? Why is nobody identifying the discrepancy of some campaigning about food poverty while opposing trade deals that would make food, clothes, and manufactured goods cheaper, to the huge relative betterment of poor consumers?

Sure, there would be families who make bad decisions and find themselves in trouble, even in a world of cheap and abundant housing and an effective safety net.

But instances of poverty owing to lack of resources would be much lower and these thornier challenges (often stemming from addictions, loss, ill-health, criminality and more) are much better identified by local charities and civil society groups anyway, as Danny Kruger argued in the Commons last week in relation to hunger. Giving nearly three million kids “free” school meals year-round would be an absolute sledgehammer to crack any remaining nut.

In today's emotive debates, it's not enough to just oppose proposals when the need is perceived as urgent. Conservatives must be better at re-setting the debate on their terms—a task much easier if they held a clear vision of the role and limits of state action.

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