

Turning rough sleepers into responsible citizens

Third Way policies on homelessness in England and the Netherlands

Evelien Tonkens and Lia van Doorn

142 'On the eve of the twenty-first century, it is a scandal that there are still people sleeping rough on our streets. This is not a situation we can continue to tolerate in a modern and civilised society'. These were the words of Tony Blair in his foreword to the policy document *Rough Sleeping, The Government's Strategy*. In this the Government set out the 'tough but achievable target of reducing rough sleeping in England by at least two thirds by 2002'. To achieve this target, the Rough Sleepers Unit (RSU) was established and a strategy was set out. In 1999, inspired by this energetic approach, the councilwoman for homelessness in Amsterdam, Gausje ter Horst, stated that from 2000 no-one in Amsterdam would ever again have to sleep rough against their will. In this article we discuss some of the implications of the 2002 target in Central London, focusing on the balance in the British government's approach between options and sanctions. We argue that this balance could be improved if more attention was paid to the views of rough sleepers themselves. On this point, Britain could learn something from the Netherlands. But the learning process is two-way: the RSU has something to offer to the Netherlands, in terms of the cohesive approach for which both countries are aiming, but which is better developed in Britain.

From welfare to investment

New Labour's attack on rough sleeping is of course part of its strong commitment to combating social exclusion. Social exclusion is one prime area in which New Labour wants to show its strength in overcoming the weaknesses of both Thatcherism and Old Labour. To put it baldly, Thatcherism hardly had a social exclusion agenda at all, as it was based on the belief that a strong market would in itself be the best route to overcoming and preventing social exclusion. Old Labour on the other hand, aimed to combat social exclusion by means of the classical welfare state. Its policy focused on *negative welfare*, i.e. providing protection against accidents that may befall people for which they can hardly be held accountable. The welfare state would then provide rights, without expecting many obligations in return. The underlying idea was that if

people were still able to meet obligations, they did not need help from the welfare state.

In contrast, New Labour tries to restructure the welfare state around the idea of *positive welfare*: creating chances and opportunities and mobilising people to put these chances and opportunities to good use. The state does not take over, but attempts to enable people to take responsibility themselves. Therefore rights are always linked to obligations. Whereas Old Labour's welfare state was a safety net, New Labour wants to offer a trampoline. This strategy is sometimes also called entrepreneurial welfarism (Stoker, 2000, 9). Service providers must show 'tough love' (Jordan, 2000): they must be both stern and supportive, both controlling and activating. There is a lot of debate on the question of whether New Labour manages to combine these contrasting aims and whether this combination is at all possible and desirable. Many critics argue that New Labour does not succeed in reconciling these contrasting aims, and some even argue that 'New Labour seeks to reconcile in language what cannot be reconciled in reality' (Fairclough, 2000, p157).

Promoting positive welfare not only implies new strategies against social exclusion, but also a new role for the state itself. In Anthony Giddens' terms: the state should not row but steer, not control but challenge (Giddens, 2000, 6). But for people to be able to take on their responsibilities, the state must enhance the quality of its service provision, and it must be clear to citizens and entrepreneurs what is being done with their tax money. Therefore, service provision should be systematically monitored and evaluated.

It is in this context that the 2002 target should be understood. The RSU was set up as a temporary departmental bureau with an annual budget of £200 million, and its strategy was based on a report by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), published in July 1998. This RSU strategy has been widely praised for its energetic, co-ordinated approach. It proposes that all services in the field of homelessness are linked, in a chain of activities which are needed to get, and above all keep, rough sleepers off the streets. This is a clear improvement: before, many organisations were working separately, often in the same streets and with the same clients, but without harmonising their activities. The RSU has firmly started to co-ordinate all this. It has set out a strategy to get rough sleepers off the streets and into houses, and it has given to existing and new organisations and services the responsibility for one or two of the phases involved.

The SEU had already gathered a lot of information on rough sleepers. It had conducted exact headcounts, concluding that there were 234 rough sleepers in Westminster, 31 in Cambridge, 52 in Oxford, etc. Since then, the RSU has repeated these counts at regular intervals. The SEU also analysed the backgrounds and other characteristics of rough sleepers. It turned out that many homeless people came from 'total institutions' such as prisons, children's homes, psychiatric clinics and the army. 40 per cent of the younger rough sleepers come from children's homes. Over 90 per cent of them are white men,

and the vast majority are alcohol reliant and/or drug users, while 30 to 50 per cent have serious mental health problems.

The first step of the RSU's strategy is to get into contact with rough sleepers. This task is performed by the newly formed Contact Assessment Teams (CAT teams), which consist of outreach workers. There are three CAT teams in central London and four in the outer London boroughs. Outreach workers were already operating before the RSU was set up, but now, as CATs, they operate in a more co-ordinated way, in small geographical areas. Most CAT teams include specialised social workers for people suffering from mental illness or substance abuse. They are usually formed by organisations like St Mungo's and ThamesReach, which already existed before the RSU was set up.

The remit of CAT workers is not only to get in touch with rough sleepers, but also to 'convince people to get off the streets' and into a shelter or hostel. To be able to accommodate them, the RSU has been expanding the number of bedspaces in shelters and hostels, and there are now 18,500 beds for rough sleepers in England. That sounds a lot, but the problem is that the turnover rate is extremely low. Most homeless stay in the same place for many months or even years. In London alone there will be an additional 1450 beds in hostels and 1000 places in sheltered accommodation.

The RSU has blocked the easiest way to achieve the 2002 target, which would be to 'cream off' the easiest clients to get off the streets. To prevent this from happening, it has split the rough sleepers into two groups, and decided that the reduction should primarily focus on the most difficult group. This so-called 'primary list' consists of hard core rough sleepers. Most of them are suffering from addiction and/or mental illness. In the past they have frequently been evicted from hostels because of their problematic behaviour. In London the primary list consisted of 123 people when the RSU started, and 20 per cent of the available hostel beds were reserved for them. (Other rough sleepers are registered on the 'secondary list'.)

It should be noted that to be registered on the primary or secondary list, and thus be in a position to get quick access to a hostel, a homeless person has to be spotted by a CAT worker several times while actually sleeping rough. Homeless people who sleep in remote places (out of sight of the CAT workers), or stay awake and walk around all night, are therefore not likely to be registered.

Meaningful occupation

Providing bed space is just one step in a long chain of activities that are needed to reduce the number of rough sleepers. Rough sleeping is a way of life, not just at night, but also during the day. Rough sleeping, the SEU and RSU contend, is reinforced by street culture. During the day, rough sleepers meet and hang out together. Those who do get a house are often drawn back into the street because of loneliness and boredom during the day. They often end up sleeping on the streets again, even if they do have a house, because their house has not

become their home. Their home is still on the streets. In order to prevent this, rough sleepers need to be offered not just shelter, but also some 'meaningful occupation' that can compete with the attractions of street culture. The RSU decided that it is the task of the hostels to offer this. 'Meaningful occupation' could be anything from courses in creative writing to computer or photography classes. Not all hostels as yet offer these activities.

Offering activities away from the streets, in competition with the attractions of street culture, is not the sole purpose of meaningful occupation, however. The activities should also contribute to the development of self-esteem and social competence. People should learn skills such as coping with bills and neighbours, sustaining friendships, and cooking meals. These kinds of skills are not likely to be developed through creative writing courses, but need to be built up through more practical training. In order to prepare clients for moving on to a tenancy, 'meaningful occupation' should consist of assistance with budget management, debt restructuring, job preparation and building social networks. However, most of the activities offered by the hostels do not train clients in these basic skills, which are needed for tenancy, but concentrate on recreational activities.

All in all, the concept of meaningful occupation, and the means of putting it into practice, still needs to be worked out more clearly. This 'pre-tenancy phase' is still a somewhat weak link in the RSU's strategy. Not all hostels offer activities, and there is also no consensus on what should be considered 'meaningful'. To stimulate hostels to engage in developing meaningful occupation, the RSU has developed a carrot-and-stick measure typical of New Labour policies on social exclusion. Hostels will shortly be given separate subsidies for beds and meaningful occupation. This means that those who are serious about offering meaningful occupation get rewarded, while those who fail to do so lose a significant part of their subsidy.

Meaningful occupation is the positive side of the effort to get people off the streets. The negative side is the RSU's attack on organisations that it sees as sustaining life on the streets. In particular, many traditional charities supported the homeless in a street lifestyle, instead of helping them to get away from the streets, according to the RSU (DETR 1999a). Their fault is that they distribute soup (and sometimes sheets or clothing) on a grand scale. In central London alone there are at least ten charities doing soup runs. The story goes that some popular spots where groups of homeless gather are visited by several soup runs in the same night, leaving behind a trail of empty plastic cups and other garbage. Soup runs are not considered to be challenging or activating, and have become a symbol of old fashioned charity. New Labour wants to ensure progress and turn everybody into active responsible citizens, and soup runs are blamed for sustaining passivity and dependence. In order to survive in the future, charity organisations will have to operate in a more activating and result-oriented manner.

Another thorn in the eye of New Labour is begging. Begging is

condemned as a passive but very effective means of sustaining dependence and a life on the streets. Five years ago, the idea of police officers arresting beggars would have seemed completely ridiculous, but since the implementation of the RSU strategy, arresting beggars has become perfectly normal. And whereas beggars used to be given several warnings first, now the police are supposed to arrest any beggars immediately, getting them before a court, where they are sentenced to a fine or (as most of them do not have the money) sent to jail. From the point of view of the homeless, begging is often effective, because the English public is very willing to give money to beggars – provided that they are white. Blacks encounter much more violence and far less sympathy. This could perhaps be one explanation for the fact that 90 per cent of rough sleepers are white men: for them, begging is paying off.

As is often the case with policy, this attack on 'the old ways' is not very subtle. Charity organisations with their soup runs receive little credit for the other contributions they make, for example by contacting and advising the homeless or helping to prevent homelessness. Furthermore, quite a number of poor people who have accommodation are forced to visit the soup runs because they cannot afford to pay for food after they have paid their rent. Seen from that perspective, soup runs make an important contribution to preventing homelessness.

Both the number of soup runs and the attack on them are probably typically British. Charity is much more highly developed in England than, for example, in the Netherlands, as class differences are much more deeply rooted there. The sense of unbridgeable inequality stimulates many rich people to occasionally make generous gestures towards the poor, particularly during cold winters and around Christmas. White homeless people are suitable objects, as they fit the traditional image of the innocent poor.

Tenancy sustainment

In the chain of activities that the RSU has set up, the next step is to get from a hostel to a house, or sheltered living. Once people get into a house, the Tenancy Sustainment Teams (TSTs) pop up. Like the CAT teams, they are set up by the RSU (becoming operative in the summer of 2000), and work in the same co-ordinated and geographically organised manner. Their task is to sustain the former homeless in tenancy and all the activities that this entails, like paying bills and sustaining social networks. They also help them to find a job or voluntary work, or to find other ways to spend the days off the streets. Whereas the RSU is meant to be a temporary unit to be dissolved in 2002, the CAT and TST teams will continue to operate after 2002.

The RSU has also recently started to develop a preventive policy. As many homeless people come from 'total institutions' like prison, care and the army, the RSU is setting up special programmes in these institutions themselves. The aim is to prepare ex-convicts, care leavers and army personnel for life outside. As these activities only started up recently, since the RSU's first

priority was getting rough sleepers off the streets, it is too early to evaluate the results.

So far, the RSU strategy seems to have been quite successful. In two years the number of rough sleepers has been reduced by over a third. However, as is generally the case with these kinds of figures, enthusiasm about this success should be tempered by a number of side effects of the strategy. For example, if the police show up frequently at a given location, the homeless move out and the numbers for that area drop. Also, the increase in the number of beggars arrested leads to a similar increase in the number of people in custody, which in turn results in a decline of the number of rough sleepers.

Nevertheless, these statistics will be regarded as representing the whole truth, and New Labour will be judged by their success in achieving these (and many other) targets, for better or for worse. Moreover, the statistics are already having some effect, as many workers feel a lot of pressure from the RSU as a result of the high targets it has set itself. Without simply blaming the RSU for this, it is worth noting that this filtering down of pressure may be the dark side of accountability. As accountability is an important element of any Third Way policy, this problem may be present in other policies on social exclusion as well. More emphasis on setting and achieving clear, measurable targets may create better performance, but at a price.

Options and sanctions – getting the balance right

So what can be said, in this particular field, about New Labour's ambition to restore the balance between rights and duties, and options and sanctions? In our opinion, there are still three problems attached to this policy, which may threaten to tip the balance between options and sanctions towards the latter.

First of all, the availability of the options is limited because of long waiting lists. There is still an enormous lack of free bedspaces, resulting in long waiting lists and many 'no vacancy' responses for homeless people calling in the morning for a place to stay. Rough sleepers who want to talk to a social worker have to wait three weeks, and those who are ready to enter a drug rehabilitation scheme must wait two months.

A second problem is that although the policy aims to stimulate positive behaviour, it also unintentionally elicits some negative behaviour, on which sanctions are then imposed. For example, while the policy aims to drastically reduce sleeping rough, it stimulates it at the same time, because it is the only way to get into the system of hostels and further help. Many homeless young people try to avoid sleeping rough because they feel it is too dangerous. They sleep at a friend's place, move about from one address to another, or hang around all night in Internet cafes that are open 24 hours a day. But this lifestyle does not give them access to a hostel. Ironically, to get into the system, they have to sleep rough, because only then can they be found by a CAT worker and receive a number that gives them access to a hostel.

The third and in our view the biggest and most intriguing problem with

the strategy concerns the nature of the options provided by the new policy. Some of these are not seen as realistic options from the perspective of the homeless, who regard them as irrational or unwise suggestions. This is not easily visible in the overall picture, because the ideas, motives and wishes of the homeless themselves hardly figure in the RSU's story. Sleeping rough and living on the streets is sometimes the least unattractive option and therefore a rational choice. Many homeless people prefer the streets to hostels. One of the reasons is perceived safety. In hostels, they fear that their possessions will be stolen. Another reason to prefer the streets to hostels, particularly for white men, is that the streets are considered to provide more privacy. Hostels are perceived as noisy places, with people shouting, quarrelling and snoring all around you. And thirdly, many homeless people dislike hostels because they are too much like the care institutions they have just left, with house rules and guards walking around with keys. So, all in all, sleeping in a hostel is not a real option for many homeless people.

This is also partly true for the options offered during the day. The RSU wants to abolish living on the streets, but it has not yet developed firm alternatives that offer the same social advantages. It would be very unfitting to romanticise street culture, as it is a world in which the law of the jungle prevails, and where aggression, theft and selfishness are quite common. But it cannot be denied that the street is also a place where the homeless can find friendship, as well as solidarity, social cohesion, mutual care networks and various other showpieces of today's policy-makers.

So there are reasons to be vigilant when it comes to the balance between options and sanctions in Third Way policies. Options should be at least as realistic and well developed as sanctions. Sanctions can only be justified if at least three conditions are met. Firstly, that there are no waiting lists. Secondly, that there are no elements that unintentionally elicit negative, sanctioned behaviour. Finally, the perspective of the object of the policy must be taken seriously and given a place within the policy. For this last issue, we turn to the Dutch policy on homelessness and rough sleeping.

Rough sleeping in The Netherlands

The perspective of rough sleepers themselves is better embedded in policies on rough sleeping in the Netherlands than in Britain. On the other hand, Britain is more advanced when it comes to developing a truly cohesive approach. Before we pursue these two issues, we will provide some basic information on rough sleeping in The Netherlands in comparison with England. Firstly, it is worth noting that rough sleeping is less of a problem in the Netherlands than it is in Britain. In the UK as a whole the percentage of homeless is estimated to be 0.7 per cent of the population (Daly 1996), while in The Netherlands this is only 0.3 per cent. Secondly, the Dutch debate on homelessness is less polarised. There is no Dutch equivalent to the criticism of soup runs, for example, while (white) beggars are not treated as generously by the public. Although the Dutch

government can be said to be developing a Third Way as well, the Dutch Third Way is not as pronounced as that of the UK, partly because the two other ways – to which the Third Way is an alternative – are also less pronounced. The Netherlands is less divided by class, so it is not surprising that class inequality is counterbalanced to a lesser degree by charity. Also, the Dutch have a famous tradition of silent tolerance (*'gedoogbeleid'*), which implies that some activities, like using drugs, are formally forbidden but tolerated in practice. Arresting beggars would be very much out of tune with this tradition of silent tolerance.

So how does the Dutch policy on homelessness take the perspective of the homeless themselves into account? As rough sleeping policy is decentralised, the answer depends on the location; we will therefore give a brief impression of the way the perspective of the homeless themselves is taken into account in two of the main cities, The Hague and Amsterdam. The Hague has set up an organisation called Maatschappelijk Herstel that is developing an integrated policy for the city, comparable to what the RSU does for England. An interesting difference, however, is that the strategy is developed in a dialogue with the homeless themselves. One of the ways this is done is by organising 'speak-ins', public meetings where homeless people are actively invited to express their opinions. At the start this did not really work very well. Sometimes the meetings ended up in shouting and vituperation, and sometimes no rough sleepers turned up at all. But after a while quite a number of the homeless took up this new role, and developed the necessary skills to become true representatives.

But do these democratic procedures have any impact on the policy on rough sleeping itself? Yes, they do, to a certain extent. One of the desires expressed by the homeless in The Hague was to have a 'social map' of the services offered by the city that mattered to them, as they perceived this to be a jungle. They wanted to have a list of all the services that were supposed to be useful for them, including their addresses, opening hours, criteria and procedures for admittance, costs, house rules and so on. In response to this request, this 'map' or guide was provided by the city, and became very popular among the homeless. Other Dutch towns followed this example.

A comparable development took place in Amsterdam, where it was decided that the homeless should be treated as fully-fledged citizens, and should therefore have the right to be consulted. Also, the city decided to listen better to what the homeless want, and act appropriately. In the meantime, the homeless and their organisations are regular visitors at the councilwoman's surgery. It must be admitted that, generally speaking, the local authorities show more enthusiasm for this democratisation than the social workers, who are more sceptical as to what the views of the homeless could contribute. However, the tone is set, and a meeting on homelessness is considered incomplete if there are not at least some homeless people attending.

Apart from these public meetings, the local authorities also hire research bureaux to investigate the wants and needs of rough sleepers. Sometimes this

yields empty results, like 'the desire for peace and love for all', or the desire to get rich and happy. But every so often, this research proves very informative and helpful. For example, homeless people complained about the services treating them in a very paternalistic manner, thereby further undermining their already damaged self esteem. This complaint resulted in setting up a project in which (former) rough sleepers teach professional workers how to improve their contacts with the homeless. The effort to really take the perspective of the homeless into account can also be seen in the reformulation of the 2002 target adopted in Amsterdam, in which the crucial phrase was that by 2000, no one should be sleeping rough in the streets of Amsterdam *against their will*.

So when it comes to taking the perspective of the homeless into account, England can learn something from the Netherlands. In Amsterdam and The Hague at least, taking this perspective into account has proved supportive of the emancipation of the homeless, and it has also shown that, although it takes some time, after a while the contribution of the homeless becomes more and more valuable.

This is not to deny that RSU policy contains some lessons for the Netherlands as well, regarding the centrally co-ordinated cohesive approach we outlined in the first part of this article. It is no accident that our positive examples come from two of the main cities, who have the time and staff required to develop a structured policy. Smaller towns, not to mention villages, often lack a clear and active policy on homelessness, and here, decentralisation has often resulted in mere passivity on this issue. A central governmental policy like that of the RSU, with a clear vision, strategy and targets, could be a fruitful incentive.

Conclusions

Whichever policy is adopted, there are difficult outcomes and choices. Even though democracy may help to strengthen the options of the homeless, it is no cure against all harms. Moreover, a better balance between options and sanctions is desirable, but cannot completely abolish the problem of rough sleeping. The RSU is not so naive as to think it can, as its target is not to abolish rough sleeping, but to reduce the number of rough sleepers by two-thirds. However, the RSU does, understandably, concentrate on getting people off the streets. It concentrates on change, progress and improvement, even though it is acknowledged that a substantial number of people will not be able and/or willing to change much. Many will never turn into responsible citizens. Charity organisations that are not dedicated solely to progress are under attack. They receive little credit for their day-to-day contribution to the quality of life of rough sleepers. The same is true for people who give to beggars.

This points to a more general problem for Third Way policies on homelessness and social exclusion, in the UK as much as in other countries like the Netherlands. How can change be stimulated, without denigrating people

and organisations that (also) offer day-to-day help, in the form of food, a friendly word, some consolation? Third Way policies are playing an active role in building a culture that is almost addicted to improvement and progress, and denigrates sustainability. This happens not only through the setting of high targets for people's self-reliance, but also through the setting of high targets in terms of policy outcomes, thereby putting a lot of pressure on organisations and workers, which is bound to trickle down to their clients.

Confronted with the neglect of former policies, that deemed social exclusion to be a mere by-product of a weak economy, Third Way policies are serious about combating social exclusion on its own terms, no matter how well or badly the economy is performing. However, policy-makers tend to forget that many of the socially excluded will never be self-reliant, no matter how much time and money is invested in them. Two thirds of the homeless may be off the streets in 2002, but who will care about the other third? Who will still respect them, offer them something to eat, or exchange a few words with them? Which organisations will still be able to do so, and which citizens will still be motivated to donate without the promise of progress? Now that all chances are offered and all options opened up, who else is to blame but these people themselves?

The research for this article was partly financed by the Juliana Welzijn Fonds (Juliana Welfare Fund) in Bunnik, The Netherlands. We would like to thank the CAT workers, TST workers and the other professionals we interviewed in July and December 2000 from the following organisations in London: the RSU, Westminster Police, St Mungo's, The London Connection, Crisis, West London Mission, The National Alliance on Homelessness, Bondway and ThamesReach.

References

- Daly, M. (1996), *Homeless policies, strategies, and lives on the street*, Routledge: London and New York.
- DETR (1999a), *Rough Sleeping The Government's Strategy*.
- DETR (1999b) *Annual Report on Rough Sleeping*.
- Fairclough, N. (2000), *New Labour, new language?* London: Routledge.
- Giddens, A. (2000), *The third way and its critics*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jordan, B, with Charlie Jordan (2000), *Tough love as social policy. Social work and the Third Way*, London: Sage.
- Kraal, E. (1998), Decentralisatie van de maatschappelijke opvang. Monitor 1997. Federatie Opvang, Utrecht.
- RSU (2000), *Coming in from the cold. Progress report on the Government's Strategy on Rough Sleeping*.
- Stoker, G. (2000). 'The three projects of New Labour', *Renewal*, Vol. 8 No 3.

Evelien Tonkens is a senior researcher and head of the programme 'Social policy in an international perspective' at the Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Lia van Doorn is a senior researcher specialising in homelessness at the Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare in Utrecht, the Netherlands.