

Tory Party blamed for rising use of food banks in church-funded report

Tories seek to avert rift with Church of England in wake of food bank report. Tory Party blamed for



rising use of food banks in church-funded report which links growing poverty to austerity measures

The Conservative party is seeking to avert one of its biggest rifts with the Church of England for decades as an all-party report on food banks warns that Britain is stalked by hunger caused by low pay, growing inequality, a harsh benefits sanctions regime and social breakdown.

The church-funded report says voluntary groups have been courageously fighting “a social Dunkirk” without the assistance of the government, and calls for urgent action to ensure ministers do more to combat hunger, including joining a new coordinating body and asking supermarkets to do more with surplus unsold products.

The initial Conservative reaction to leaks of the report – which is formally published today – was hostile, with one minister claiming the increased use of food banks was due to greater publicity about their existence.

It is also unlikely that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will shift its stance on the administration of benefit sanctions, even though the report says they are the single biggest reason for the poor resorting to food banks. DWP sources said it was very clear at the start of a benefit claim what was required of a claimant and there would be consequences for failing to meet that commitment.

The report said that although some inquiry witnesses blamed “chaotic” parents for children arriving at school hungry, others pointed out that some families could not afford decent food.

Similarly, it noted that while some families lacked basic cookery and food management skills, others were so poor they could not afford to switch on the cooker, or did not have a cooker because the kitchen of their private rented flat contained only a microwave.

The row over the prevalence of food banks and the scale of deep poverty in the UK has simmered for much of the coalition's time in office, but Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury, appears determined to confront the government. He said that despite having seen suffering on a recent trip to Africa, he was more shocked by the plight of a family he met at a food bank in England because it was so unexpected.

He says the report, prepared by an all-party parliamentary inquiry into hunger in Britain, paints a "stark picture: hunger stalks large parts of our country".

The inquiry was jointly led by the Labour MP Frank Field and the bishop of Truro, the Right Rev Tim Thornton, a strong supporter of food banks. Two Tory MPs, a Conservative peer and a Labour MP also sat on the group. Welby played a central role in the six-month study, funded by his Archbishop of Canterbury's Charitable Trust, which describes food banks as "the new shock absorbers of society".

The report says benefit-related problems are the single biggest reason for reference to food banks. "There is a clear moral case to address the shortcomings that exist in our welfare system. Our evidence shows that the current system is cumbersome, complicated and fails to respond effectively to the daily changes in people's lives. A single error can itself end up being the recruiting sergeant for money lenders," the report says.

The latest statistics show that since October 2012, 833,628 individuals have received an average of 1.73 benefit sanctions each. From April 2000 to June 2014, a total of 3,063,098 people received an average of 2.04 sanctions each. Almost 60% of sanctioned individuals received only one sanction, but 21.5% received more than two, and 46,000 received 10 or more. A Commons select committee is conducting a fresh inquiry into the sanctions regime.

The report also points to the way in which the cost of food, fuel and rent has increased since 2003, in a trend unprecedented in post-war Britain.

Field said: “These fundamental changes in the relative prices in budgets of food, utilities and rent have blown sky-high the comfortable post-war assumption that our wages system and our benefit system guarantees a minimum which most of us would regard as tolerable.”

The deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, acknowledged problems with the system. “There is some evidence that people who are subject to benefit sanctions end up using food banks for a temporary period of time. I think that while it is, of course, necessary to have sanctions in the benefit system, I think we should introduce a traffic light system so that some of the sanctions are not imposed quite as overnight as they sometimes are.”

The report insists that contrary to government claims, food banks have spread because of greater need. “More recently, rising national income no longer appears to be benefiting those at the bottom of our society,” it finds.

Matt Hancock, the business minister, was reluctant to accept this conclusion, saying one reason for rising food bank use “is because more people know about them. And the amount of people who work in food banks and give up their time, I applaud – I think that’s fantastic. But the central question here is how do you tackle these deep-ingrained problems of poverty, and the single best way through that is undoubtedly work.

“I’m a huge supporter of the food bank movement, but the truth is that poverty is coming down, partly because the number of people in jobs is going up.”

The Tories are more likely to respond positively to proposals to encourage supermarkets to give surplus food to the poor. The food redistribution charity FareShare provides 1m meals a month by connecting food companies and charities, but this represents just 2% of the available usable food lost from the industry’s supply chain.

The report calls for a new publicly funded body, Feeding Britain, involving eight cabinet ministers, to work towards a “hunger-free Britain”; bigger food banks, called Food Banks Plus, to distribute more free food and advise people how to claim benefits and make ends meet; and a rise in the minimum wage and the provision of free school meals during school holidays for poorer children.

The report says: “We do not believe food banks should take the place of statutory welfare provision in this country, but our evidence suggests there is a strong desire for longer-term interaction between food banks and vulnerable households, and an eagerness for these relationships to become embedded within local communities so they can help people overcome the deep-seated causes of hunger.”

A government spokesperson said: “This report is a serious contribution to an important debate, with many good ideas, and recognising that the reasons behind demands for emergency food assistance are complex and frequently overlapping.

“As a country we have enough food to go around, and we agree that it is wrong that anyone should go hungry at the same time as surplus food is going to waste. There is a moral argument as well as a sustainability one to ensure we make the best use of resources.”

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