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## Give Me Five

“If Charles Dickens were to have walked down the gas-lit street in North Kensington that I was born into he would have been completely familiar with the multi-occupied slums condemned as unfit for human habitation many years before. I describe those living conditions in my childhood memoir ‘This Boy’ and I know how prevalent they were in towns and cities across the country. I know that many others experienced the cold and hunger that I endured. Yet it was my mother’s generation that bore the brunt of grinding poverty, not mine. I was born into an era of hope. Atlee’s Labour government had forged a consensus designed to vanquish the “five giants” of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness.

The welfare state provided me and my sister with free school meals, the NHS, local libraries and educational opportunities beyond anything our parents ever experienced.

And for my mother, struggling to cope alone with two children and a debilitating heart condition, there was the Family Allowance Act (introduced as virtually the final deed of the wartime coalition government) which at least provided some money when she was too ill to work.

It was a safety net beneath the precarious jobs she took on, cleaning houses at the posh end of Ladbroke Grove; money for her children that she could rely upon.

She never lived to see my sister and I grow into an adulthood more prosperous than anything she could have imagined but always felt instinctively that things would be better for each successive generation. It wasn’t an optimism unique to my mother; everybody shared that conviction.

So how have we come to this? A society where we have a level of child poverty double that of our European neighbours; where two out of three children of single parents are living in poverty and where the number of poor children is set not to fall, but to rise to over five million in the next two years.

No doubt there are some who say it’s due to fecklessness or something to do with the mythical so-called dependency culture.

But this can't be true: just as my mother worked hard to make ends meet, 70% of children in poverty are in working households. As for the rest, the vast majority will be in families where parents can't work, just as my mother couldn't work when illness forced her into hospital.

Irrespective of circumstances, the blame surely doesn't lie with the child. What kind of society singles children out for punitive treatment?

I know from experience the difference that a modest cash injection can have on a families fortunes. That's why I'm backing the Daily Mirror's 'Give Me Five' campaign.

Our quest as a nation must be to eradicate child poverty, not to stand complacently by as it becomes further entrenched."