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**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACED BY EUROPEAN WELFARE
STATES: THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR CHILD WELFARE**

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An agenda for children: investing in the future or promoting well-being

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Abstract

- The construction of the title of this paper is not designed to pose a false dichotomy between a future-oriented 'investing in children' strategy and a strategy that promotes children's well-being in the present. Instead, it provides a framework for:
 - an analysis of the current UK's Government's agenda for children in an emergent 'social investment state' in which children represent 'citizen-workers of the future'; and
 - thinking how the social investment approach might be modified in the interests of children's well-being and flourishing in the present.

Children: '100% of our future'

- Children emerged as key figures in New Labour's nascent 'social investment state' early in 1999 when, in his Beveridge Lecture, the Prime Minister pledged the Government to eradicate child poverty in two decades and explained that children were the Government's 'top priority' because they are '100% of our future'.
- The strategic significance of children for a state keen to equip its citizens to respond and adapt to global economic change so as to enhance competitiveness in the knowledge economy is underlined by a Strategic Audit drawn up by the Government's Strategy Unit. It states that the first 'strategic priority' is to be 'ready for the future'. This exemplifies the future-orientation of the 'social investment state', which is also reflected in New Labour's pre-occupation with life-chances and equality of life-long opportunity rather than the more traditional social democratic concern with equality as such.

Policies for children: investing and regulating

- Investment in children involves improvements to both cash support and services. Children's services are also being redeveloped following a broad-ranging Green Paper. While its main emphasis is on the protection of children, children and their parents are also required to exercise responsibilities. Policies are designed to

ensure that investment pays off in terms of promoting social cohesion and security and turning children and young people into responsible adult citizens.

Why only two cheers?

- Children have moved from the margins to the heart of social policy. A discourse of investment is being used to good effect to promote a children's agenda. Yet there is some disquiet about the way in which children are being positioned in this brave new world of social investment

'Beings' or 'becomings'?

- The first concern is rooted in what has been called a 'new paradigm of childhood', which values children as 'beings' in the present and not just as potential adults or 'becomings'. Thus, paradoxically, the iconisation of the child in the 'social investment state' has involved the partial eclipse of *childhood* and the child *qua* child. Child care and education policies are more oriented towards employment priorities – current and future – than towards children's well-being.

Citizens of the present or the future?

- It is as citizen-workers of the future that children figure as the prime assets of the 'social investment state'. Criticisms of this model centre both on its elevation of paid work as the primary obligation of citizenship, to the detriment of care and voluntary work, and on the limits of its acknowledgement of children as rights-bearing members of the citizenship community.
- A number of bodies have criticised the Government's piecemeal and partial approach to children's rights. In general the Government has been more willing to countenance rights for children who do not live with their parents than to intervene in the private sphere of the family to uphold the rights of those who do. The same imbalance applies to children's participatory rights, which, with some exceptions, have been better developed for looked after children than for others.

All or some children?

- One of the criticisms made is that not all children have the same strategic significance as future citizen-workers for the 'social investment state': for example disabled children and the children of asylum-seekers.

Children and parents

- While the prioritisation given to children has been welcome, it has, in some ways, been at the expense of their parents. Great emphasis is placed on parenting and the responsibilities of parents. Although this has been backed up with some support services, there is also a strong whiff of authoritarianism in the measures adopted to ensure that parents turn their children into responsible citizens. Less attention has been given to the relationship between financial deprivation and the ability of parents to fulfil these parenting responsibilities. This has implications for the financial support provided for non-employed.

Back to the present: promoting well-being

- Not all of New Labour's policies for children are reducible to the social investment template. Nevertheless, this template does provide a dominant frame

for its agenda for children, which is not rooted in the values of organisations working in the field.

- There is a degree of consensus around the need to temper the futuristic and instrumentalist social investment approach, in the interests of children's well-being and recognition of their status as child-citizen members of our society. The Government's emphasis on children as investments needs to be balanced by a more explicit appeal to principles of social justice and to the human rights of children *qua* children. The current emphasis on children's life-chances needs to be rooted in an equal concern with children's well-being and flourishing *as children*.