

BRITISH AUSTERITY INFLICTING MISERY: U.N. POVERTY EXPERT

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Bleak future:The departure of Britain from the EU will almost certainly put pressure on the British economy.Reuters

The British government's policies of austerity are directly linked to a rise in poverty in the United Kingdom, a United Nations expert said in a scathing report after a two-week fact-finding mission to the country's poorest districts.

Philip Alston, the U.N. special rapporteur for extreme poverty and human rights, concluded that efforts by the Conservative government to pare state spending were "entrenching high levels of poverty and inflicting unnecessary misery in one of the richest countries in the world," his team said in a statement about his preliminary findings. Since 2010, the Conservative government has announced more than £30 billion (nearly \$40 billion) in cuts to welfare payments, housing subsidies and social services, and the British leadership is in "a state of denial" about the devastation its policies have wrought, he said.

Children affected

Although overall poverty levels have remained fairly constant under the Conservative government, most measures show that poverty has risen among children and working families.

The use of food banks almost doubled between 2013 and 2017. Families that receive benefits are now more than \$2,600 worse off every year, according to an analysis by the Child Poverty Action Group, an advocacy group. The British government strongly criticised Mr. Alston's report, citing a measure — contested by some poverty researchers — that suggests poverty has in fact fallen during its tenure.

"We completely disagree with this analysis," the Department for Work and Pensions, which has overseen the welfare changes, said in an emailed statement. "With this government's changes, household incomes have never been higher, income inequality has fallen, the number of children living in workless households is at a record low and there are now 1 million fewer people living in absolute poverty compared with 2010."

The release of the report coincided with a crucial stage in negotiations for a British withdrawal from the EU, and Mr. Alston warned that Brexit "poses particular risks for people in poverty, but the government appears to be treating this as an afterthought." The departure of Britain from the EU will almost certainly put pressure on the British economy and cause additional problems for the poor, especially for young people, because living costs would likely rise and money from Brussels would dry up, according to a joint assessment by seven leading children's charities.

The rapporteur was particularly scathing of bungled efforts to streamline the way welfare payments are made to individual recipients after delays in a shift to a new system, known as Universal Credit, led thousands of people to fall into poverty.

"The introduction of Universal Credit and significant reductions in the amount of and eligibility for important forms of support have undermined the capacity of benefits to loosen the grip of poverty," Mr. Alston's statement said.NYt

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