Explain how your work with the data set(s) illuminates the debate about living standards in Britain from c1900 to c1955.

'The test of our progress,' declared Franklin D. Roosevelt during his second inaugural address, 'is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.'[1] History has demonstrated an almost continual separation of individuals based on wealth and their subsequent living situation. However, it is worth considering the nature of poverty, if it possible to measure and to what extent it has changed over the period this study focuses upon. Beckerman and Clarke suggest that there is not an accurate method of measuring poverty.[2] Meadowcroft argues that it is not that poverty is immeasurable, but more that the way in which it has been defined changed dramatically from an 'absolute' form of poverty to a 'relative' one.[3] The former assertion has been challenged on numerous occasions across the last 150 years, as various surveys have been conducted to ascertain the root of poverty and how it may be judged.

The work of social investigators Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree provided an insight into the living standards of London and York respectively. Charles Booth sought to map the areas and extent and location of poverty across the capital.[4] Joining policemen on their beat, he was able to observe that in spite of the relative happiness of the poor, 'the uncertainty of their lot, whether or not felt as an anxiety, is ever present as a danger.'[5] Booth's findings were considered to be isolated to London, which was not indicative of the nation as a whole and greater analysis would be required using a more comparative approach. His process of combining a quantitative approach with humanitarianism is one that influenced the work of Rowntree, inspiring him to investigate the situation in York.[6] Like his contemporary Booth, Rowntree's survey was an impressive undertaking. The total number of households interviewed was 11,650, comprising of 46,750 people.[7] Although it provided an interesting insight into the situation, agreeing with Booth's assessment that 30% of inhabitants were below the 'poverty line', the investigation was limited in its scale and in the qualitative data it

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[1] 'Franklin Roosevelt's second inaugural speech, from January 20, 1937' http://c250.columbia.edu/dkv/extracts/0711_fdr_newdeal.html#transcript1 (date accessed 23 November2012)

[2] W. Beckerman and S. Clarke, *Poverty and Social Security in Britain since 1961* (1982), p. 1.

[3] J. Meadowcroft, 'Foreword' in K Niemietz *A New Understanding of Poverty: Policy, Measurement and Policy Implications* (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2011) p. 11.

[4] 'Charles Booth Online Archive Poverty Map 1898-99' http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view_booth_and_barth&args=531000,180400,6,large,5 (accessed 5 November 2012)

[5] C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London, Vol 1.* (London: MacMillan, 1902), pp. 159-160.

[6] B.S. Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* [Centennial Edition] (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2000), p. xxiii.

[7] Ibid, p. xxvi.

provided.[8] Booth and Rowntree's work was founded on both an economic and philanthropic vision of securing worker's futures. Booth in particular, was unconvinced by the poor being reduced to the 'thrifty or unthrifty' that brought difficulties upon themselves.[9] Rather, he felt that government should seek to play a more active role in aiding the working class.

The reasons for this movement away from the principles of self-help utilitarianism are part of what makes the measurement of poverty inherently difficult. The ability to define the needs of poor people in the first 60 years of the twentieth century is complicated by governments' changing philosophy on what an individual required to not only survive, but to contribute. At the turn of the twentieth century, the desire for workers, particularly men, to ensure Britain's 'industrial pre-eminence' and provide stability within the empire outweighed concerns over the standard of living of the public.[10] Britain had been the world's workshop of the nineteenth century after a period of sustained industrial acceleration fed on coal. As a result, the workforce needed to be able to maintain this level of production. Countries such as the USA were starting to encroach on some of Britain's historic trading markets and a seemingly healthier workforce. This was highlighted by the conditioning of troops returning from the Boer War. Many were deemed unhealthy and therefore incapable of enforcing imperial controls. The first survey of significant rigour on a wider scale was carried out by the Board of Trade in 1904. The public's spending patterns and income was used to determine a 'cost of living index' that the government would be able to use to compare against other developing industrial nations. Just over 2000 working households provided details on their wages and expenditure amongst other aspects of their lives. Although it gave the Board of Trade an insight into working families, the survey still contained several drawbacks. For instance, due to the groups responsible for organising the participants, skilled manual workers were over-represented and 'the non-working poor were totally excluded from the survey.'[11] Nonetheless, the research of the contemporary social investigators and the 1904 survey contributed to the changes that took place in the early part of the twentieth century.

As Prof. Ian Gazeley illustrates, the transformation of British social provision, coincides with the formation of a Liberal government in 1906.[12] The subsequent laws that are enacted with the advent of Herbert Asquith provided greater security within the structure of the state for those that would before have been facing the real horrors that

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[8] I. Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain 1900-1965* (Palgrave 2003), p. 8.
[9] 'Charles Booth Online Archive' – (Senate House Library MS797/II/24/4.32) *(date accessed 4 April 2013)*
[10] *'Lecture by Prof. Ian Gazeley on the Economic and Social Context of Poverty and Living Standards 1880-1969' https://studydirect.sussex.ac.uk/file.php/15859/Lecture-Gazeley-Dawn.mp3 (date accessed 10 October 2012)*
[11] *'Lecture by Dr Rebecca Searle, an Introduction to the Living Standards Surveys' https://studydirect.sussex.ac.uk/file.php/15859/Lecture_Searle_Intro_2_Surveys.mp3 (date accessed 4 April 2013)*
[12] Ibid, pp. 13-14.

came with destitution, and the grim spectre of the workhouse. In the period prior to the First World War and in the aftermath, the government was handicapped by financial constraints and an aversion to providing a universal system of care. Regardless, there is evidence that the principle of 'fairness' was becoming a compelling motivator in calculating people's basic subsistence. As time went on, the measurement with which individuals identified poverty and the method used to survey respondents was honed to take into account contemporary problems and the advent of a wider range of products, leisure pursuits and employment factors. Although the extensive work of nineteenth century social investigators had been thorough in the context of the period, the formative years of the twentieth century exposed some of the limitations of the earlier surveys. Just before war broke out in 1914 Arthur Bowley altered the manner with which poverty was assessed, believing the model used by Rowntree to be 'too harsh as it did not include the consumption of meat.'[13] In 1921, The Times reported that;

> 'it will be obvious, therefore, that the reductions of wages which are now being proposed by employers on the ground that the cost of living has fallen substantially, must if the Ministry of Labour figures are accepted , result in serious injustice, and in many cases depress wages below pre-war standards.'[14]

This diversion of thought between employers and the Ministry of Labour reflects the belief of John Hicks to characterise the 'determination of wages by collective bargaining' as being the normal method of deciding wages by this time.[15] This was a feature that encouraged governments to be more aware of the living standards of the public, so they could set wages in line with the cost of living at the time. The period after the First World War until the second survey thus saw a period in which the 1904 findings no longer held credence. For example, the middle class felt there was too greater emphasis placed wages being linked to working class income and there should be a separate survey for them. This kind of evidence also reflects the expansion of the electorate as governments became more aware of not upsetting the working class whom made up a significant portion of the population. This was a consideration that did not have to be taken to the same extent prior to the First World War, or certainly in the nineteenth century.

In the period prior to the 1937/8 survey being commissioned, the pricing index that was being used was attacked for being obsolete, due to the availability of new luxury commodities, technological advancements and reduced numbers of children per household. More items such as travel costs and fruit were advocated for being added to

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[13] I. Gazeley and A. Newell, 'Poverty in Edwardian Britain', in *Economic History Review, 64, 1 (2011)*, p. 56. NB. He did however, lower the allowance Rowntree allowed for children believing the quantity to be too much.

[14] *The Times*, 15 June 1921.

[15] J.F. Wright, 'Real Wage Resistance: Eighty Years of the British Cost of Living', in *Oxford Economic Papers, New Series, Vol. 36, Supplement: Economic Theory and Hicksian Themes* (Nov. 1984), p. 153.

how the pricing index was formulated. In response, the Ministry of Labour embarked on a far wider reaching diagnosis of the state of the British poor. The limitations of the 1904 survey were exposed as it was concluded the Board of Trade findings did not account for seasonal change or fully account for spending habits. As such, the second major national survey to be carried out was expanded to include middle class families and 30000 households were initially approached to account for individuals refusing to participate. The form was much more detailed and encouraged respondents to keep a daily record of food expenditure over a quarterly seasonally divided year. It concluded that absolute poverty was close to being eradicated.[16]

The Second World War provides the catalyst for change under the guidance of the Beveridge Report, and the so-called 'cradle to grave' provision. The archetypal, if a little misplaced, image of the 1930s with people queuing outside soup kitchens was one the electorate was determined to avoid post-war. The 1953/4 survey was a reflection of this desire to monitor levels of affluence in the period since war ending, an era restricted by rationing. War is a catalyst for social change and upheaval and as with the first survey; the pre-war survey was seen to be redundant because wages were linked to the price index set from the pre-war period. This was considered to reduce the actual wages workers took home and in effect impact upon the pension many would eventually receive. This situation was exacerbated by post-war inflation and the cost of living rising. The new enquiry was to be the largest undertaking of the 3 surveys and there are still more than 13000 records intact. The 1953/4 survey was also far more methodologically rigorous as several of the drawbacks of the earlier surveys were tackled, with an improved, if not perfect, reflection of both working and non-working members of all social classes. Moreover, a problem of previous surveys was that there was no way of judging with certainty that households were accurately recording their expenditure, perhaps due to fear of revealing spending to other members of the household. This resulted in each member of the household keeping a record of their individual expenditure over a 3 week period.[17] These were of course designed so they could be used in policy making that would impact on the living standards of the public. Consequently, the data collected and analysed was centralised into national committees.

Clearly, government involvement is not the only influence on perceptions of poverty and living standards. Social expectations impacted by 'universal' suffrage, dietary knowledge and the impact of leisure time and opportunity have also played an important role in the shifting nature of how poverty is measured. The 'minimum' of what has become required to be living in adequate social conditions has broadened with the introduction of 'luxury goods'. Regardless, the role of government and how information is gathered is pivotal in

[16] *'Lecture by Dr Rebecca Searle, an Introduction to the Living Standards Surveys'* *https://studydirect.sussex.ac.uk/file.php/15859/Lecture_Searle_Intro_2_Surveys.mp3* *(date accessed 4 April 2013)*

[17] Ibid., *(date accessed 4 April 2013)*

understanding the creation of data and how it is implemented. This study seeks to explore this area of the debate.

The three surveys that were taken during the course of the first half of the twentieth century were gradually more expansive and became incrementally more detailed and technical in their delivery, construction and collation, but they are by no means the first of their kind. From the Domesday Book through various national surveys in the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the ruling powers have strived to discover the wealth of the population.[18] In the nineteenth century, locally created statistical organisations fuelled debate on government policy by conducting surveys around the United Kingdom. Often, these would be based on issues that were considered critical for the areas in which they were carried out such as working conditions or access to education.[19]

Surveys, by their very construction, have limitations. Many of these early forms of survey are clearly confined by their aims. Similarly, the twentieth century living standards surveys were restricted due to a number of factors. The surveys form the basis of the scheme of work I have devised; both in terms of how the act of surveying is carried out, and in the reasons behind it and what the implications of it are. In recording the datasets it provides an invaluable insight into the living standards of people in Britain over the course of a fifty year period.

I have chosen to consider how the surveys changed over time as part of my enquiry. Aside from the obvious difference of there being a considerable number more surveys still intact from the 1953/54 survey, as well as there being far more respondents, there is clearly greater ambition shown in the next two enquiries commissioned by the Ministry of Labour. The scale of the last post-war survey is incredible, aiming to encompass all social classes over a period of three weeks across different seasons to provide a staggered accurate record.[20] There are a number of enquiry questions that the surveys, as documents, present on their own. Foremost, is the process of carrying out the interviews. On a simple level, students should consider how they would feel if they were an individual that faced questioning, but more than that they will start to think about what could influence their responses. For example, what does it suggest about the information provided that male members of a household in 1953 had separate forms to fill in? What information would they not want to reveal? If you were aware of how revealing your living situation would impact on your wage, how would that alter your response? What incentive would you require to complete forms? By handling the forms

[18] Lecture by Dr Sam. A. Shave on *'Social Investigation and Social Survey'* https://studydirect.sussex.ac.uk/file.php/15859/Lecture_Shave_-_Surveys-Investigation-History.mp3 (accessed 15 October 2012)
[19] Ibid.
[20] Lecture by Dr Rebecca Searle on *Living Standards Surveys.* *https://studydirect.sussex.ac.uk/file.php/15859/Lecture_Searle_Intro_2_Surveys.mp3*

without reading responses to begin with, students can start to analyse the commitment it would take to fill a survey in and the pressures or embarrassments that would accompany the process.

As well as examining the surveys on a macro level, in terms of where the surveys go, how they are used and whether the government needs to know that information; they can also access them from a micro level. The personal comments and accounts that are included by respondents give an insight into the members of a household, their respective roles and what can be learnt about the wider picture from their isolated experience. Society has started to go full circle, from the Benthamite independence of the nineteenth century through to quasi-complete state funded support, before returning back in the direction of self-help over hand-out. The datasets enable us to understand better the reasoning behind this national consciousness.

In essence, the enquiry I have constructed is designed to investigate how government gathers information and forms judgments on the living standards of the public. I want students to engage with the 'process' and consider the accuracy of the feedback produced. Students will query the impact of the surveys on the respondents and the problems the surveys create. Fundamentally, I want the students to investigate why governments need to gather the data contained in these surveys and begin to start questioning whether it is necessary. I also consider the use of tangible documents such as Code Books and the surveys themselves will further augment the consideration of which aspects of an individual's life determine their place on the economic scale and whether they have reached a position of affluence in society.

The idea of 'affluence', derived from Galbraith's rebuke of American society for allowing squalor and individual wealth to co-exist, pithily describes the growth in living standards for the majority of British in the first half of the twentieth century.[21] It may seem incomprehensible that there remain individuals that live, as Smith and Townsend describe poverty, of being 'excluded from ordinary patterns, customs and activities' on the basis that they lack the resources to acquire that 'normalcy'.[22] However, the reality is that many in today's society face just such difficulties and the United Nations determination to eradicate poverty this century appears unrealistic. Students often feel removed from abstract concepts such as living below a modern 'poverty line', but the relevance of examining those issues is evident. There is lack of awareness of the impact of government initiatives such as the Welfare State on peoples' living standards. Students should be questioning what the driving forces are behind government decisions, how the information behind those decisions is gathered and crucially, who benefits from it? If Roosevelt is to be believed, then progress can only be judged if the lives of the poor have been improved by government.

[21] Lecture by Prof. Gazeley.
[22] Lecture by Dr Shave.

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