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Foreword by Geordie Greig

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Introduction
The story behind the Dispossessed

THE Dispossessed was never conceived of initially as a campaign. That came later, as the newspaper responded to the reaction from the readers to our shocking investigation into poverty in their city. By July 2011 a staggering £7.2 million had been raised, making it the most successful fund-raising campaign ever by a British newspaper outside times of war or for a natural disaster. It has received awards, been embraced by the public and lauded by policymakers, philanthropists and politicians of all parties.

In the summer of 2011 I was invited to speak on a panel organised by the John Smith Memorial Trust at 11 Downing Street. The broad aim of the event was to critically evaluate the government's Big Society initiative, but one of the questions panellists were asked to address was: 'Can the media – as demonstrated by the *Evening Standard*'s anti-poverty campaign – be a force for good in reaching out to citizens and reinforcing a caring civil society focused on volunteering and giving?' Given that the panel was held on the day News Corporation announced the closure of the *News of the World* amidst accusations of criminal phone hacking, and headlines dominated by examples of press power at its worst, this question assumed an added piquancy.

As I sat there, among luminaries from Left-leaning think tanks, the voluntary sector, civil servants and a former director of Gordon Brown's Strategy Unit, there was, as you might expect, some cynicism in the room towards the Big Society as a whole. Some argued that the concept was fine in theory but a fig leaf for draconian spending cuts in practice, others that it was a mishmash of different ideas that nobody really understood, and

some that the idea of devolving power was laudable but that problems arose in motivating people to volunteer.

None of this was particularly new, but there was one vision that the panel thought *was* novel, and which appeared to unite the room: that the *Evening Standard*'s anti-poverty campaign had achieved something that had never been done before. We had created 'a unique model', they said, that was 'effective in supporting active citizenship', that 'enabled ordinary people to come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities', and that 'encapsulated a vision of public engagement and responsibility on a large scale'.

Our fund had given people the power to change their lives, based on the premise that it is grassroots organisations that can often identify areas of local need better than central government. These were groups that punched above their weight and delivered a lot on relatively modest funding. Of course, initiatives such as ours were not equipped to supplant the government role in addressing the underlying causes of poverty in society, but that was never the intention.

One of the top players in the philanthropy field, Sir Stuart Etherington, chief executive of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations representing 8,500 voluntary bodies countrywide, set out his view of how the Dispossessed had broken new ground. 'First of all,' he said, 'the *Evening Standard* has an editor with an admirable editorial policy and who was keen to flag this up. Second, it was driven by a set of outstanding articles and sharply presented case studies that made people aware of things they weren't aware of as to the extent of poverty in London today. Third, the paper developed an effective mechanism, by setting up a permanent endowment Fund, to which the public could respond by making voluntary cash donations. Fourth, the paper had a transparent distribution system, through its partnership with the Community Foundation Network, which could allocate the funds efficiently and cheaply and funnel them to the grassroots groups who could address the problems the paper had identified. And fifth, the government backed the campaign by offering pound-for-pound match funding for money raised from

the private sector, and this leverage was an attractive proposition to private donors.

'What's interesting,' he added, 'is that government were following rather than leading. They were topping up a media-led initiative that engaged ordinary people. In my experience what drives people to take action is passion. And the articles unleashed a passion in the public to do something, the likes of which I have not seen before.'

The articles that Sir Stuart refers to, running for just over a year from 1 March 2010, are republished in full in this book, and reveal the evolution of what began as an idea, became an investigation, grew into a fully-fledged campaign and finally became a historic permanent fund for London.

This is how it all started.

Geordie Greig, editor of the paper, called me into his office in early December 2009. He held up a 15-year-old Special Report of the *Evening Standard* called 'The Betrayed' and said: 'Have you seen this?'

He was pretty animated. He had just met with millionaire philanthropist Sir Trevor Chinn, then Boris Johnson's poverty adviser and chair of the Mayor's Fund. Sir Trevor had told Geordie that what inspired him to become a philanthropist was a series on poverty that he had read over a decade ago in the *Standard*. That investigation had made such an impression, he said, that he had kept it in his cabinet to this day. I was aware of this Special Report because prior to Geordie becoming editor in early 2009, I had interviewed Sir Trevor and he had told me about it too.

'The Betrayed' was published in January 1995 as a 24-page Special Report by the then editor Stewart Steven, and was something of a journalistic tour de force. Steven's preface described it as having emerged from an unprecedented two-month inquiry into life and conditions in London's East End. The articles, written mostly by Keith Dovkants, a top investigative journalist who had been the paper's chief feature writer before leaving from the *Standard* in 2009, exposed the squalor of underprivileged Londoners living in the shadow of Canary Wharf. Together with another reporter, David Taylor, and photographers Ken

Towner and Glenn Copus, their series laid bare the poverty in the East End. They wrote about the overcrowded housing where children slept three to a bed in homes declared unfit for habitation, communal graves for paupers' babies, an infant death rate in Tower Hamlets twice that of Westminster, and poverty and unemployment rates three times the national average. They also revealed racial violence perpetrated by roving BNP thugs, failing schools, and a complete lack of hope among the people who lived there. 'This collated series,' noted Steven, 'is one of the most important documents ever published by the *Standard* about London.'

Now Geordie had identified its historic potential and wanted to take it further. He wanted me to come up with a series of hard-hitting pieces that would shine a spotlight on those living at the bottom of the pile in London today. In essence, a sequel; but it had to be what he called 'profound, contemporary and different'. And for the whole of London, not just the East End.

I wasn't sure whether this was a dream assignment or a poisoned chalice. Whereas the 1995 report, compiled at the tail-end of the Thatcher-Major years, had been the work of two reporters working in tandem with, according to Stewart Steven, 'a substantial part of the newspaper's editorial resources devoted to the investigation', I was to be left largely to my own devices. I was used to working alone and had good contacts in the field, but what concerned me was this: poverty was no longer the shocking issue it had once been and writing a big series about it could easily come across as too worthy. It was no longer news to tell readers that there was poverty in London's East End. The challenge was to find material that was compelling *and* surprising.

There was a time when reporters who wrote about poverty in London were able to move the public to action. Eminent nineteenth-century journalists like Henry Mayhew revealed the misery of Dickensian London to great effect. His aim had been to study the precarious lives of the poor 'trade by trade', and his vivid reportage of street folk – from chimneysweeps to costermongers, watercress girls to mud-larks, bootlace sellers to workhouse vagrants – brought to life the teeming underbelly

of the capital. Mayhew's compassionate yet unsentimental articles, first published in 1849 in the *Morning Chronicle,* had the power to disturb and inform and were later bound into a voluminous collection known as 'London Labour and the London Poor' (which remains in print) that became part of the social reforming movement of the time.

But those days of rampant, overt poverty with children as young as seven sent out to work in streets running with raw sewage were long gone. Now we had a welfare state spending £185 billion a year (amounting to more than 20 per cent of government spending), as well as a minimum wage and laws preventing child labour. Poverty and inequality in 21st-century London was often more subtle and hidden. Besides, the field was already so well ploughed by think tanks and social affairs reporters, and so deluged by official statistics, that it would be hard to come up with fresh material – or so I thought.

I did, though, have one vantage point in tackling this subject that would serve me well. Thirteen years before I had gone to America on a Harkness Fellowship where I was hosted by Columbia University at their National Center for Children in Poverty in New York. I ended up writing a book, *Chasing the Red, White, and Blue,* that retraced the epic 1831 route across America of French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, and which described how the social contract between rich and poor in the past 170 years had been stretched to breaking point. For two years I travelled across the United States, talking to people at every level of society, from supermarket clerks and ex-felons to Washington lobbyists and politicians. At the time, the American economy was riding a wave, Bill Clinton was president, yet one in five American children under the age of six were living below the poverty threshold, then calibrated at $16,660 a year for a family of four.

As I contemplated my London brief, one memory of my visit to America stood out: the huge admiration I had witnessed there for the resolve to tackle child poverty in Britain. Sometimes you see your country most clearly when you leave its shores and look back from afar; and I had looked back from New York in 1999 and listened to the historic speech by Prime Minister Tony

Blair to a packed Toynbee Hall in London as he pledged to 'end child poverty within a generation' and 'halve it by 2010'. Blair also promised: 'If the Labour government has not raised the living standards of the poorest by the end of its time in office, it will have failed.' Usually not much attention is paid on that side of the pond to what happens on this side, but all the experts and Democrat politicians I met told me that they saw Britain, under New Labour, as leading the way and laying down a benchmark that left their country trailing. I remembered it so well because, frankly, it made me feel proud to be British.

But Blair's promises - though partially achieved in the country as a whole - had spectacularly crashed as far as London was concerned. Official statistics showed that 41 per cent of the capital's children lived in poverty in 2010, rising to 44 per cent in inner London, and that the city's poverty rates were almost exactly the same as ten years previously. (The government defines households with annual income of less than 60 per cent of the median as living in poverty, which translates, after deducting housing costs, into £5,980 for a single adult and £14,508 for a couple with two children under 14, for example.)

There were many reasons for this disaster, some specific to London and the high numbers of immigrants it had to absorb, though critics also pointed to general failures of political will and understanding. Colossal sums had been spent by Blair, and later Gordon Brown, to try to meet their pledge of halving child poverty - and although they took half a million children out of poverty nationally, it merely put a dent in the problem, leaving 2.9 million children below the official poverty line in the UK, and Labour still 70 per cent shy of their national goal. Moreover, these modest gains, experts claimed, had been 'quick fixes', using tax credits to hit targets by moving families who were just below the poverty line to just above it. The strategy of tax credits had done little to help families in poverty who were outside the tax system and had only superficially addressed the real problem. Of real concern was the fact that the number of very, very poor people - below 40 per cent of median income - had risen remorselessly. This was the real challenge. But in trying to move people out of unemployment and into work, the govern-

ment had underestimated the difficulty of engaging the poorest people and making them 'work-ready'. Expensive schemes such as Sure Start, aimed at families in deprived areas, had reached only a fraction of intended recipients, and with minimal gains. And on welfare reform, ministers had avoided radical moves to tackle the welfare trap that worked to demotivate people from seeking jobs in the first place.

The idea that two in five children - 650,000 in all - were still living in poverty in London after a decade of prosperity for the city pointed to an alarming state of affairs. I began to wonder: what did this poverty look like? What did it feel like to wake up every day and have nowhere to go, nothing to spend, and nothing to look forward to? As a feature writer with 20 years in the field, I had done dozens of stories about the misery of people who had fallen through the cracks, but I felt that as a paper we needed a fresh perspective that went deeper than typical journalism if we were to achieve something worthwhile.

We invited Camila Batmanghelidjh, the founder of the children's charity Kids Company, to address a meeting of our top editors. At 5pm on 14 January 2010, having put the late edition of the paper to bed, a dozen of us gathered in Geordie's office. Ian Walker and Amy Iggulden, who head up the news desk, were among those present, as well as deputy editor Sarah Sands and Jackie Annesley on features. Geordie kicked off by talking about the Betrayed report of 15 years ago, how London had lots to celebrate but that there was this great divide, an alarming tale of two cities. Camila was totally enthused by our project, and spoke about what she saw as the clamour among politicians in the run-up to the election to court the middle-class vote, and how it was so important that disenfranchised groups were written about to provide the missing narrative in the political debate. She talked movingly about the hidden chronic poverty she faced daily in pockets of London - children who hadn't eaten for days, teenage mothers living without basic amenities. Her lucidity, passion and charisma infused us all.

Looking back at my rough notes on that first meeting, what's interesting is the sheer range of story ideas and the overall vision that began to emerge. One thought was to reflect the

divide between rich and poor by focusing exclusively on a single borough, Islington, because this was where Blair had lived, where Blair and Brown had allegedly made their leadership pact, and where the New Labour project ultimately began. It was also one of the capital's most deprived boroughs, with 48 per cent of children living in poverty. Some of the specific ideas we discussed were: a fly-on-the-wall piece contrasting two Islington families at dinner; a tale of two desks comparing the lives of two children who sat side-by-side in school but came from different sides of the tracks; following a child for a weekend who had nothing to eat; a forensic examination of a poor family's weekly budget; and following a drug dealer who supplied the chattering classes. Many of these would turn out to be impractical, though elements would seep into, and form part of, stories we later published.

By the end of the meeting we had rejected the concept of looking only at Islington as too confining, but I decided that Islington was nevertheless where I might begin and I headed out to see what I could find. I am a great believer in sometimes just walking the street and paying very close attention to what you see. It was an area I knew well, having written regularly about crime, gangs, hoodies, and youths dubbed 'the untouchables' who lived in the housing estates off the Caledonian Road. A youth worker had once described the Caledonian Road to me as 'London's grand canyon': 'To the right, deprived social housing,' he had said, 'to the left, wealthy private houses worth £2 million. And never the two shall mix.'

My first recces yielded little new to me. And if it wasn't new to me, how could I make it feel fresh to anyone else? The project was feeling amorphous. It would help to have a more precise focus. That was when I decided to go to Granita restaurant on Upper Street, the alleged setting for the 1994 Blair-Brown leadership deal. It had actually closed in 2003, and was now a Mexican restaurant called Desperados. The irony seemed promising.

As I stood outside Desperados, my eye was drawn to an alleyway across the road and a community centre at the end of it, St Mary's Youth Club. I knocked on the door and only a receptionist was in – but I got contact details of their lead youth worker, Nick Adams, from the noticeboard. I called Nick, explained that

I was looking to interview youngsters living in poverty within a stone's throw of the former Granita, and asked: could he help?

A few days later we met in Desperados and Nick introduced me to a couple of youngsters attending the youth club. One of them, Vincent Maduabueke, lived in a social housing block diagonally opposite the restaurant with his younger sister and unemployed mother. The 18-year-old college dance student had a good set of GCSE results and was living on benefits of £50 a week, just £7 a day. He sometimes went hungry and had fights with his mother about it, he said. He was shy, soft-spoken, and reticent to talk much about himself, and it took a while before the conversation started to flow. Towards the end, Vincent said that he had applied for 32 jobs but had never even got an interview, and that his real passion was to go to university. When I asked what was stopping him – education being the fastest route out of poverty – he leaned forward and said with a mix of anger and resignation: 'It costs £19 to put in a UCAS application form. That's £19 I don't have.' Here was a young man doing everything to lift himself out of poverty, and yet what stood between him and his future was just £19, an amount most of us spend on cappuccinos in a week. His frustration hit home with me. Later it would hit home with thousands of readers in a way that I could never imagine.

I was also exploring other lines of inquiry. The 1995 Special Report had contained a powerful report by Stewart Steven about how the poor ended their lives buried in a communal paupers' grave located in the East London Cemetery in Plaistow. I called the cemetery who assured me that they had long since ceased this practice, but I began to wonder: what about other cemeteries, those not within the bounds of the 1995 investigation, which had restricted itself to the East End? I began by investigating one of London's biggest and most famous burial grounds, the Islington and St Pancras Cemetery. There was no mention of the practice anywhere on their website, yet when I called as a member of the public and casually asked the clerk if they still did pauper burials in communal graves, she said quite openly: 'Yes, in fact we have three baby burials scheduled first thing tomorrow morning.' She added that the first two were to

be buried in the Protestant children's section, the third in the Catholic children's section.

The next day I spoke to the elderly gravedigger who, instead of filling the grave with soil, had simply laid a few loose planks and some green felt over the top once the mourners had departed. He told me: 'I only fill in the grave when it's full. These take four coffins each.' He shook his head and added: 'When it's children I find it hard to focus. I lost a granddaughter once – that's all I'm saying.'

When I told people what I had witnessed, they were shocked that this practice persisted. Ordinary Londoners seemed to have no idea that this was going on. Not even the head of Islington Council, John Foster, knew about it. Later I would interview him and he would deny – not wilfully but out of pure ignorance - that Islington used communal graves. 'Have we got communal graves? I don't believe we do,' he said, turning to his press officer. Yet his own council officers would tell me that hundreds of babies, children and adults had been buried communally in this cemetery in the past three years – a rate of more than one a week. When I told Foster, he looked genuinely ashamed and said: 'I'm shocked. I see no reason why the poor can't be buried individually like everybody else.' I was dismayed, though, that John Foster, a man who grew up in poverty and in care, did not know what was happening on his watch, and it would later prompt me to widen my inquiry to other councils.

By late January I had cleared my regular feature workload and was working exclusively on the poverty series, finding case studies and immersing myself in the latest literature. This would provide the statistical and intellectual framework for our pieces and included reports from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation ('What will it take to end poverty?'), Save the Children ('Measuring Severe Child Poverty in the UK 2010'), the London Child Poverty Commission ('Child Poverty Facts'), the New Policy Institute and City Parochial Foundation ('London's Poverty Profile'), the Child Poverty Action Group ('Poverty in the UK'), the Department for Work and Pensions ('Public attitudes to child poverty'), as well as unpublished research carried out by the Mayor's Fund for London.

I was also making headway in finding emotive personal stories and using all my contacts to help me. I interviewed Jaydine, for example, a 21-year-old single mother who lived within sight of Canary Wharf and lived on the run-down Aylesbury Estate in south London. This was the very same bleak estate where Blair had chosen to make his first speech immediately after winning power in 1997, and where he had thumped his fist and promised 'no more no-hope areas'. The concrete ramparts had been earmarked for demolition, but there were still 7,500 people living there. In Jaydine's case, her flat was utterly bare - no curtains, sofa or chairs, and most alarmingly, no fridge or oven or even a cot for her baby. I also interviewed Barbara Harriott, a mother of 11 children, whose story was poignant, but also provocative and controversial. And then there was Ade, a Nigerian immigrant with a computer science degree, living with her four children and her 79-year-old mother in a barber shop. Ade was in limbo, indefinitely barred from working or receiving benefit until the Home Office got through its massive backlog and made a decision on whether to grant her leave to remain in the UK.

At this point our series had no name. Essentially I was depicting the lives of the have-nots, the two in five who lived below the poverty line, but we needed a title with succinct resonance. One afternoon features executive Jackie Annesley started doodling. 'Do you think this works,' she said, 'or does it have too many esses?' I looked down. Jackie had written down two words: 'The Dispossessed'. The phrase carried a Dickensian undertone, yet it seemed fresh and, as far as we could see, had never been deployed in a newspaper campaign. The term, it seemed, was only ever used with any frequency by football commentators, as in 'Rooney has been dispossessed by Lampard'. In a broader context, to be dispossessed conveyed being deprived of something essential, of being cut off. It seemed to fit. The people I interviewed were cut off from the London most of us take for granted. Vincent on Upper Street had been immune to what his own street had to offer. Jaydine had no television in her flat and, incredibly, no idea who David Cameron was. Other interviewees had never heard of the Southbank Centre, or been to the West

End. And those were the luckier ones - I would later interview men who slept in rat-infested rubbish-bin rooms on housing estates, and rough sleepers whose plight epitomised the dispossessed.

The plan was to publish on Monday 1 March and run the series for a week, and I was racing to have everything written and ready a week before. I had prepared a 3,000-word opening piece (a double, double-page spread) and four additional spreads, penning 10,000 words in all, and had been liaising closely with Jackie and with news editors Amy Iggulden and Ian Walker, whose support and feedback had been crucial. But I had no idea, yet, what the editor thought.

On Wednesday 24 February, Geordie called a 4pm meeting of about 20 of the paper's senior editors and top brass in the boardroom, including our managing editor Doug Wills, picture editor David Ofield, and production editor David Lucas who sits on the 'back bench' and lays out the paper. Everyone had been sent the pieces and Geordie asked two of our most respected voices on the paper, business editor Chris Blackhurst (now editor of the *Independent*) and political editor Joe Murphy, what they thought. Geordie's style is collegiate at times and he wanted to know: 'Have we struck the right tone? Can we be accused of gawking at poverty? Will poverty be an issue in the election? Is this something we should be running at this time?' Chris Blackhurst began by injecting a note of scepticism, wondering what outcome we were hoping to achieve. 'Are we offering solutions ourselves to the poverty?' he asked. 'I think if we run something this long and in-depth, we need also to take on what's gone wrong, and how to fix it.'

Joe Murphy was unequivocal: 'I don't think we're qualified to offer solutions,' he said. 'What we can be is a witness to London. We can throw open the debate to policymakers and to politicians, asking what they intend to do about it, but I don't think we should rush out with a manifesto of our own.' He looked at Geordie and added: 'I think we should go for it.' Little did we know then that Chris's point would also get addressed later, though in ways we couldn't then envisage. After that the meeting was all about the strategy to generate greatest impact

and the pieces that Amy still needed to commission from other reporters to augment the series. Geordie asked Doug Wills to see what he could do about clearing the entire first five pages of all advertising so as to give our report maximum impact.

We also needed the right image for the front-page splash that would kick off the series. Various snappers had been dispatched with the brief of capturing the patchwork of poverty and wealth of London in a single photograph - not an easy task - and as the final weekend approached, we were still without a defining killer image that satisfied Geordie. With one working day to go, Matt Writtle, who had photographed the paupers' graves and some of the case studies and was my regular accomplice, was sent out to see what he could come up with. Matt is a brilliant chronicler of social reportage and he would relish this sort of open-ended assignment, but this time the stakes were especially high. Picture editor David Ofield had called him and said: 'No pressure Matt, but you've got a day to find the front cover. The only criterion is you've got to get Canary Wharf in the background.'

Matt headed to the Robin Hood Estate in Poplar. It's a boomerang-shaped estate, with two buildings and a grass bank in the middle from where Canary Wharf looms large, and he took a few frames standing on the hill. Ultimately, though, he needed somebody in the frame, but the building was locked to all except residents. 'I waited for somebody to let me in and started knocking on doors,' Matt recalled. 'I saw a sign on someone's window that said "A dog is for life, not just for Christmas", and I thought the person who lives there is probably a decent sort. This woman answered and her flat was in bad shape - you couldn't see the floor for dog hair - but she said I could shoot from her balcony as long as I kept her out of it. I said fine, but after zipping off a few shots, I realised that I needed a human being in the frame, so she agreed to stand in the foreground in profile looking towards Canary Wharf with a cup of tea in her hand. I was nearly done when her husband came home, and for a second I wondered what he'd make of my being in his flat! I needn't have worried. When I told him why I was there, he sat me down, offered me a drink, and they told me their stories. She was 37, he was 42, and they were white working-class cockneys

living on incapacity benefits. I was there for an hour and a half listening to their story and photographing them, and then I rang Dave Ofield and I said, "I think I've nailed it mate." And he said, "Don't get too confident, they might not like it here." I said, "Trust me Dave, this will be the picture that launches the campaign." And so it did.

There was one other key element that Geordie had secretly organised, and this was for a big name to back our campaign. It was all fairly hush-hush until the last moment with only a few of us in the know. Prince William is patron of the homeless charity Centrepoint, and was an inspired choice. He wrote a moving 'call to arms', which appears at the start of this book.

The report launched on Monday 1 March. On the front page, under the headline 'The Dispossessed', we splashed with Matt's photo and a few carefully crafted words by Geordie: 'London is a shameful tale of two cities. In the richest capital in Europe almost half our children live below the poverty line. These families are cut off from the life most Londoners take for granted. They are the dispossessed. The *Evening Standard* will this week shine a light on their plight. With the general election imminent, we demand action.'

The series was billed as a 'Five-day special report on London's forgotten poor'. My first piece - which appears in Part 1 of this book - ran across pages 2, 3, 4 and 5 and it was the article I had worked on hardest because it would set the tone for everything that was to follow. Joe Murphy wrote a trenchant comment piece on how poverty had slipped down the political agenda, and called on all parties to redress this with the election looming. And our editorial began: 'This week the *Standard* embarks on a unique piece of reporting on London: The Dispossessed, a survey of the capital's hidden poverty.'

The editorial went on to articulate our wider aims to not only open Londoners' eyes to the capital's hidden poverty, but also to shame Labour for allowing poverty to fall off the radar and for breaking their promises after 13 years in government, and to encourage all three parties to seek effective solutions. The editorial concluded: 'As much as anything, it is we Londoners who need to open our eyes to poverty that is never more than a few

streets away. Until we do, London will continue to be shamed by the plight of its poorest citizens.'

There was a real buzz on the back bench as the edition went off stone. A huge amount of thought and effort had gone into it – the content, design, editing, and layout – and involving the hard work of dozens of people. Now we held our breath and waited to see what the public made of it. None of us could have predicted what would happen as the week unfolded.

The next day we ran eight pages of coverage as planned, leading with the 'call to arms' from Prince William and a splash by Joe Murphy and myself headlined 'Londoners Unite to Fight Poverty'. It was a powerful package that built momentum on our first day's coverage. Comments came in from Mayor Boris Johnson, Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, novelist Joanna Trollope, and the heads of homeless charities such as Shelter and St Mungo's. Geordie received a letter from Michael Caine congratulating him on the 'wonderful campaign' (though of course, it wasn't yet a campaign in the true sense) and recalling his own childhood, growing up in poverty in Elephant and Castle.

Over the next few days, in addition to my coverage, we ran big set pieces by our education and health correspondents, Joe Murphy wrote a Q&A spread that put Cameron, Clegg and Brown under the spotlight, asking 'What will you do to tackle the scandal of poverty if you win?', and there were various comment pieces. Our news desk was doing a brilliant job spearheading all this, but there was something else, entirely unplanned, that simultaneously began to unfold.

London stirred. At first I thought it was just me who was receiving dozens of emails, telephone calls, and later letters and packages, but it soon became apparent that the editor's office, news and features desks were all swamped. By day two, our switchboard was jammed with readers clamouring to offer help to the young people who featured in the report. There were more than 50 offers of concrete help for Vincent alone. One email came from a serving Metropolitan Police officer called Nick who said: 'I see poverty and desperation in my work, but I detach myself because "it's part of the job". Yet reading the

Standard, I was shaken to realise that here is a young man whose ambitions are dependent on what I spend on lattes in a week. Here's a fella staying honest and trying to better himself despite huge obstacles not of his making. As well as covering his UCAS application costs, I'd like to give him and his family theatre tokens for a West End dance show. I'm just a regular bloke, but something in your report made me feel shabby. We all need to be made to feel shabby from time to time. Thanks for giving my conscience a bit of a kicking.'

Many readers sent cheques of £19 to pay Vincent's UCAS fee, an administrator from Middlesex University, then Vincent's preferred choice, called to say they wanted to make an exception and offer him a chance to apply direct without even going through UCAS. And Sinead Mallozzi, chief executive of West End restaurant Sketch, emailed to offer Vincent a night out. 'It touched me to read that Vincent has never eaten in a restaurant. I know it's a small gesture, but what the *Standard* has exposed makes my blood boil.'

For Jaydine, there was a similar flood of support. The 21-year-old was offered a new fridge as well as cots, prams, clothing and toys for her 11-month-old baby. Sam Stock, 43, an investment banker, typified the response. 'I've never been so moved,' she wrote. 'I was completely taken aback that people are living in such poverty in the centre of London. Being a mum and reading about Jaydine who doesn't even have a cot for her baby made me cry. There are probably many just like her. I have a pristine cot in my loft to give. I will buy her a new mattress and sheets to go with it and some clothes for her baby and will hire a van to get it to her.'

It is hard to put into words what it felt like to be the recipient of so much generosity and goodwill. People wanted to help – and they wanted us to help them to do it – which could personally be a little overwhelming when you were trying to manage hundreds of calls and emails every day on top of your job as a reporter. In the end, managing and reporting on the readers' response became my next assignment, and we developed a system for recording the offers and collating them into lists to pass to the recipients.

In the decade I had worked on the paper, I had never known anything like it. Hard-bitten newsmen such as Ian Walker and David Lucas told me they had never seen a response to compare, and that it made them feel 'proud' to work for the *Standard*. It would be fair to say that the paper has not always been universally loved by Londoners. Some had regarded it as too Conservative under former editor Veronica Wadley, and the paper had sometimes been regarded, unfairly in my opinion, as too close to the *Daily Mail*. London is a liberal city that embraces all-comers, including immigrants, many of whom make up our 7.8 million population. And judging from the talk we all heard in the pubs and cafes, Londoners seemed to like the fact that their paper was taking the lead. In the Commons, too, the paper was praised by backbenchers for its 'crusading social journalism'.

It was clear that our series had resonated deeply, but as our editorial noted: 'What to do about it is another question. Many readers have made heartening personal offers of help. Beyond that, though, we need political action. No one has decisive answers on how to tackle poverty in the capital. What our series has at least done is draw the attention of ordinary readers and politicians alike to this shameful situation - and that is a vital starting point.' As with 'The Betrayed' report of 1995, we had raised the consciousness of Londoners but offered no mechanism for redress.

Things might have rested there. The five-day series was over. A general election was less than two months away, and I went away for a short break. But all the while, calls and emails kept coming. At the end of each day, I would turn on my BlackBerry and see scores of emails bounce into my inbox. Many were from readers, asking, demanding, 'what can we do about it?' One reader, Tara Silvester, who ran a public relations firm, was typical. 'I feel embarrassed to live in London while children are still being buried in paupers' graves,' she wrote. 'I thought we had all moved on from that. If there is a charitable fund to avoid children being buried four to a grave, I would be keen to donate.'

At first we eschewed reader promptings to extend our report into a campaign. We tended to run money-raising campaigns at

Christmas, not in March. However, Geordie, the news editors and myself started talking about widening the ambition of the project, and exploring how the paper's investigation could have a more lasting impact. We had hoped to open Londoners' eyes to the poverty on their doorstep and pressurise politicians to raise the issue up the political agenda; instead we generated a passionate response from readers who wanted us to do something concrete about it. We had no idea, then, that we were just at the beginning of what would turn out to be an extraordinary journey that would lead to the paper raising millions of pounds to help community groups tackle poverty across London. That blow-by-blow narrative is woven through the sections of this book. Suffice to say, the achievements of this still-evolving campaign have gone beyond what any of us on the paper imagined.

In July 2010, we attempted to raise £1 million from the private sector (which the government would agree to match pound for pound) for community groups tackling poverty across the capital - and we would get there in just 18 working days. The generosity of Londoners would be overwhelming. From schoolchildren to pensioners, the middle classes to millionaires, money poured in.

By the end of 2011 we will have given £3 million to grassroots groups tackling poverty, and will still have around £4 million endowment to provide longer-term support to transform the lives of London's most vulnerable citizens. It is something that all of us on the *Standard* are very proud of. The stories of groups we have funded - as republished in these pages - show that we have already changed many, many lives.

It would lead to the paper being honoured at the British Press Awards, winning Campaign of the Year and the Cudlipp Award for outstanding popular journalism. Geordie would be given a Beacon Award for outstanding philanthropy, and I would receive several journalism awards as well. The *Standard* would also win Daily Newspaper of the Year at the London Press Club awards, with the judges picking out the Dispossessed campaign for special praise.

In May 2011, Geordie and I accompanied one of our interviewees, Nabil Ahmed, to Downing Street to collect a further £1 million donation from David Cameron. That week the govern-

ment published its 'Giving' White Paper in which it offered to provide match funding to any media outlet that can replicate what the *Standard* has done. We have set a precedent, they said, for other newspapers to try to replicate in other cities. Minister for Civil Society Nick Hurd later added in an interview with the paper that 'the *Standard*'s work with the poor is an example for other cities to copy' so as to unlock a 'hidden wealth' of people keen to help others. But as the *Yorkshire Post* (which tried to clone our fund with mixed results) discovered, this is not easily done. There are some key ingredients that the *Evening Standard* is well positioned to deliver. Firstly, I believe that this sort of campaign suits a city-based newspaper better than a national one. It helps to have a geographically concentrated constituency. Second, it helps to have a wealthy tax-base for sizeable donations to give the campaign momentum, and London has the City. And finally, it cannot be done half-heartedly - you need an editor with passion willing to invest time and money in investigative journalism, because ultimately it is people's stories and readers' responses to them that drives everything.

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I was the fortunate journalist to be in the right place at the right time when the call came; but although I would go on to spearhead the writing of the Dispossessed campaign, everything you read in this book, and everything that happened around it, has been the product of an incredible team effort. Ian Walker, Amy Iggulden and David Lucas were the engine at the heart of operations, driving forward the campaign and pacing it brilliantly. Our picture editors David Ofield, Richard Bond and Sarah Sheppard chased down the right images, and our team of photographers, led by Matt Writtle, duly delivered. Critical roles were played by managing editor Doug Wills, deputy editor Sarah Sands, features editors Jackie Annesley and Charlotte Ross, and designers Nick Cave and Lee Bearton, who designed the Dispossessed logo, among other things. Political editor Joe Murphy played a key part, as did former business editor Chris Blackhurst, particularly when it came to roping in his City contacts to back the fund. Reporters Miranda Bryant, Jonathan

Prynn and Mark Prigg all made valuable contributions, as did Jack Lefley and countless other editors and subeditors who daily work to get the paper out. Philanthropist Michael Holland joined our Dispossessed Fund board and has made an invaluable contribution. Credit must go to David Milner for his astute editing of this manuscript, and to my agent Judith Antell, who first eased this journalistic project into book form. At the end of the day though, ultimate credit must go to Geordie Greig, who had the vision and drove it forward with energy and passion.

We could also not have done this without the work of our Dispossessed Fund administrators, Stephen Hammersley, Lesley Talbot and Melanie Molloy at the Community Foundation Network, who have been our partners since the fund's inception. Camila Batmanghelidjh, founder of Kids Company, generously gave of her time and contacts when we most needed them. The big private donors are listed in the appendix, but thanks go to them for taking a gamble on us and supporting our fund. In particular, to the following donors who gave £50,000 or more: John Caudwell, Mark and Mo Constantine, Sir Philip Green, Diana and Roger Jenkins, Pierre Lagrange, the Reuben Trust, Selfridges, and Westfield Shopping Centre. Major donations were also received from the Eureka Trust, Goldman Sachs, the Fulham Football Squad, the Grosvenor Group, Westminster Foundation and JP Morgan. Huge gratitude also to the BIG Lottery which has given £1 million as part of their People Powered Change initiative, and which shares our fund's aim of acting as a catalyst to improve the lives of those most in need. Importantly, we would also wish to acknowledge the generosity of the Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the Minister for Civil Society, Nick Hurd, who have supported the fund with millions of pounds of match funding, and with that £1 million donation made to Nabil in Downing Street.

David Cameron said our fund had 'opened Londoners' eyes to the poverty on their doorstep - and opened their wallets too'. And so, yes, most of all I would like to pay tribute to ordinary Londoners - both those who trusted me to interview them, and those who donated money and whose generous response to our

campaign confounded my expectations, and made me see my own city in a new light.

The articles that follow chronicle the incredible journey of a little more than a year in the life of The Dispossessed - but this is just the beginning. Even as I write, the Museum of London at the Barbican is preparing to host a major exhibition of the Dispossessed in its 'Inspiring London' space. It bills it as 'an extraordinary story of ordinary Londoners being helped by fellow Londoners to lift themselves out of poverty'. Unexpected exciting developments unfold every week. The potential is there for the *Evening Standard* Dispossessed Fund to make a lasting contribution to tackling poverty and inequality in London, and leave a permanent legacy.

29 March 2010

'I'm haunted by the image of a fox carrying away our dead son'

IT was after 10pm and Godwin and Emem Iferi had just returned from church to their home in South-West London when there was a knock at the door. Outside stood two policemen. 'Are you Mr and Mrs Iferi?' one asked. 'Have you just lost a baby called David?'

Godwin, an electrical engineering graduate, was confused. 'We had buried our five-day-old son David at Battersea New Cemetery six weeks before and it had been the most painful day of our lives,' he recalls, 'but what were two officers doing at our door?'

They invited them into their home in Merton, never imagining the horrific news they were about to hear. '"Your son's grave was disturbed," one began,' recalls Emem. 'We asked them how they knew it was our son's grave and the officer said they found his hospital wrist identity bracelet, the shawl in which his body was wrapped and ...'. Emem looks away, her body beginning to shake violently. Godwin hugs her. 'It's OK, honey.'

After a long silence, he continues. 'They said they had found part of David's remains, including the spine and the vertebrate column. They said there'd been no human interference, that the scratches on his coffin were those of a fox. It dawned on us that the police were telling us that a fox had taken our son's body. I could not compute. I shouted at the officer, "What sort of fox can dig through six feet of soil and open a sealed casket? Do foxes carry spades?"'

But unbeknown to the Iferis, who have a three-year-old daughter, there had been nothing apart from loose planks covering David's grave. Moreover, nobody at St George's Hospital -where David had died on 2 August last year and which had arranged the funeral - had told them, they say, that David's coffin would be the first to be laid in a grave that would remain uncovered for months until it was eventually filled with up to 13 other babies.

Godwin's face is etched with pain. 'A mass grave! Nobody said anything about a mass grave,' he says. 'What sort of country is this? Even in Nigeria where I grew up, they bury people in their own graves. This is an abomination. If the hospital or the council had told us there'd be other babies in that grave, I would never have allowed it. We might not have much money, but we are a decent Christian family. I would have sold our old car, borrowed money, done whatever it took for a father to bury his son with dignity.'

The story of the Iferis' torment is a reminder of why the current abhorrent practice of burying pauper children in mass graves cannot be allowed to continue. 'We as a family are on our knees,' says Godwin. 'We have been let down by the whole system - the Metropolitan Police, Wandsworth Council, and especially St George's Hospital who have never even written to us to express their regret. I ask myself: how in modern-day London could this be allowed to happen?'

David Iferi was born five weeks premature on 28 July last year at St George's in Wandsworth by Caesarean section. The doctors were not hopeful he would survive. He had an exomphalos, a rare congenital defect in which the intestines develop outside the body and require an operation to put them back in. The mortality rate of an uncomplicated exomphalos is 10 per cent, but it rises to 100 per cent in the presence of chromosomal abnormalities and associated defects. David had the lot - a deformed foot, a hole in the heart and Edwards syndrome, in which an extra chromosome causes organ malfunction and is frequently fatal.

But David proved himself to be a fighter and his parents believed he'd pull through. The doctors had been wrong about their daughter, Anna-Marie, they recalled, having predicted that she, too, would die within 24 hours of her birth (for different reasons); and they clung to the hope that the professionals would be wrong again.

For five days David clung on in St George's neonatal intensive care unit, Emem hardly leaving his side. 'I hugged him, stroked his hair, kissed his little body. I told him he'd be fine, that we'd be strong enough to overcome,' she says. But on Sunday 2 August,

Emem developed a fever having gone home to have her stitches out and, while she was in bed with a raging temperature, Godwin got a call to say David had died. 'Later that night I told Emem. She screamed and screamed. I tried to hold her. I tried my best. She was inconsolable.'

The next day the hospital called him in to discuss funeral arrangements. 'They said we could do it privately at our expense, or the hospital would take charge for free which was the norm in cases like ours. Nobody ever mentioned that other children would be buried in the same grave.' Godwin accepts that he probably signed the hospital's standard consent form, which says: 'I understand the grave may include other babies.' He says: 'I was too distressed to read what I was signing and nobody pointed out that sentence to me.'

The hospital chaplain has since admitted: 'It's true that we don't spell out how many babies will be in the grave or how long it might be open. What we're offering is a mass grave, that's exactly what it is. It may be that we need to review our practice.'

On 19 August, David Iferi was buried at Battersea New Cemetery in Morden. It was a modest affair attended by the pastor from their Pentecostal church and a few friends. After a service in the chapel, Godwin carried the little white coffin inscribed with his son's name down the tree-lined drive before being led towards a scrubby section on the fringe of the cemetery denoted on the grid map as 'U2'. U2 is the paupers' section of the graveyard. David would be one of 37 children buried in U2 last year in pits of 14 bodies per grave. But the Iferis knew nothing about this. 'His grave looked normal,' recalls Emem. 'It was six foot deep and there were no other coffins in there. The gravedigger took David down and we laid a wreath. As we left, our friend asked the gravedigger why he was not filling it in. "We wait for you to go," he said. We departed feeling closure, that his body had been laid to rest with dignity. Our plan was to save for a memorial stone for the grave.'

The police visit six weeks later changed everything. 'As a parent you hope not to bury your child, but to be told that a fox has taken their body is beyond your worst nightmare,' says Godwin. 'Wandsworth Council called the next day and we had a

meeting at the police station. Everybody was very apologetic and the leader of the council, Edward Lister, sent a letter expressing his regrets.'

A council spokesman has since told the *Standard*: 'We now instruct our cemeteries to use metal covers to lock down paupers' graves that are not yet full to prevent this happening again. These poor parents had buried their son; now they had to deal with him being taken by a fox. It's your worst nightmare.' Later he added that Wandsworth would end their practice of burying children in mass graves and would sign up to the *Standard*'s charter.

But for the Iferis, the police investigation was about to take a new twist. 'A few days later,' recalls Godwin, 'the police returned and said that forensic tests showed the bones they'd found were not our son's but rather that of an animal. For a moment I felt a surge of hope that it had all been a terrible mistake. But the police said that his empty coffin and wristband meant it definitely was his body. It was too much for me and I told them, "Leave my house! I don't want to see you here ever again."'

On 3 December, the Iferis received a letter from Detective Chief Inspector Sean Wanless, head of Criminal Investigations for Merton, confirming that 'David's coffin was found together with the shawl he was wrapped in', but that 'sadly David's body has not been recovered'. Because there had been 'no human intervention', he added, the police were 'not conducting a criminal investigation'. The case was closed.

Godwin was outraged. 'If I was a person with money and influence, they'd never have shut the case. Don't tell me it's not a criminal act if a baby's body goes missing.' But it's not just the police who have upset him. 'Nobody from the council or hospital has called to ask, "How are you coping? Can we help?" We've needed counselling to cope, but we've had to pay for it ourselves.

These are extra costs he can ill afford. Having arrived to do his masters in electrical engineering at Kingston University five years ago, Godwin supported himself with a job as a YMCA night receptionist, working alternate weekends, and although

it brought in £700 a month, it left the Iferis below the £1,035 poverty line for a family of three.

So far they have been unable to muster the strength to return to the cemetery. 'It's too painful,' says Emem. 'I have only to shut my eyes to find myself back in the cemetery haunted by the terrible image of a fox picking up our son's head. I now hate foxes with a passion.'

She wipes away her tears. 'Our daughter, it's so painful, but sometimes she calls out for her brother. We've tried to explain that he's in heaven, but you know . . . she came with me to all his scans, helped pick out his clothes - it's very hard for her to accept that he's gone.' She pauses. 'One day she will ask to visit her brother's grave. What will we say?'

30 March 2010

Couple make first visit to son's mass grave
'The thought that David's story will change the system is a tremendous comfort'

GODWIN and Emem Iferi walk slowly up the poplar-lined central boulevard of Battersea New Cemetery in Morden. After a few dozen yards, Godwin doubles over in pain and starts to turn back. 'I don't think I can go any further,' he says. Emem takes his arm and tells him: 'Come on, we can do this.'

For Godwin, 36, and Emem, 33, today is to be excruciatingly tough. It is six months since police officers knocked on the door of their South London home and delivered the horrific news that the body of their five-day-old son, David, who had been buried six weeks before, had been dug up and taken by a fox. The baby's coffin had been found, along with his identity wristband and the shawl he'd been wrapped in, but his remains would never be found. The Iferis, who also have a three-year-old daughter, have been so traumatised they have been unable to visit the last resting place of their son.

Today, though, the couple have decided to return to the grave for the first time. 'We are doing this to begin our own healing, but also because we want to draw a line in the sand to prevent what happened to David happening to others,' says Emem. 'We believe the best way to achieve this is through the *Evening Standard* charter and we are honoured to add our son's name to this charter.'

The couple hope that our charter – today renamed the David Iferi *Evening Standard* Charter in memory of their son – will bring an end to the system of burying pauper children and babies in mass graves holding up to 30 babies. 'In our case,' says Godwin, a masters graduate of Kingston University, 'nobody from St George's Hospital, where David died, or Wandsworth Council, who buried him, ever told us that our son would be buried in a mass grave.'

The charter ensures that every parent, however poor, is offered the choice of a single grave for their child, that 'open'

graves are secured to prevent intrusion by animals, that parents who choose communal graves are told the truth about how many babies will be buried there, and that they be allowed to personalise their plot. So far all but two of the London councils that have arranged communal burials in the past three years have signed up. They include Wandsworth, whose practice of burying up to 14 babies in a pit covered only by loose planks until it was full led to the tragedy suffered by the Iferis. Their home borough of Merton, where babies are buried 12 to a pit, has also agreed to sign up.

Today the Iferis' mission is deeply personal. Emem leads Godwin past the immaculately maintained private plots with their gleaming tombstones towards a scrubby piece of land on the fringe of the graveyard. This is the communal paupers' section and it is here that Godwin and Emem come to a stop.

'It's this one, isn't it?' says Godwin. He and Emem stare silently at a bare plot that has recently been filled in. A few tufts of grass have begun to push through but apart from a bunch of dead daffodils, it is entirely unmarked. Unlike other pauper graves nearby, some of which have been personalised with decorations, there is nothing to mark the plot where David, along with an unknown number of other babies were buried, not even a cross. Emem bends down and lays a fresh bunch of tulips on the grave that no longer bears her son. Off to the left is a freshly dug paupers' grave, sealed with a lock-down metal cover.

By adopting the charter, Wandsworth guarantees that from now on, no more than four babies will be buried in a grave, the number of coffins that can be respectfully laid side by side in a grave rather than on top of each other, and that each unfilled paupers' grave will be secured by a metal cover.

'It draws back memories so, so heavy,' Godwin says. Emem adds: 'The strength inside of me is that what we are doing here today will put an end to mass graves for other children in London. I am also thinking of our daughter, Anna-Marie. One day when she's older she will ask to visit her brother's grave. By putting David's name to the *Evening Standard* charter, we will be able to tell her that the system changed because of him.'

Godwin nods. 'I never thought I could do this, but coming

here has given me the courage to take the next step, which is to save for a memorial stone for our son. It is a terrible wound in my heart knowing that David's body has gone and will probably never be found, but we need to put up a memorial that remembers him and his significance to us - and to London. The thought that David's story will change the system and help other parents who lose their babies is a tremendous comfort to us.'

After a while, the couple begin the long walk back to the central boulevard where they have parked. As soon as Anna-Marie sees them, she leaps out of the car where she's been waiting with a family friend and - pigtails flying, a huge smile on her face - runs towards them shouting. Emem scoops her up. 'Has mummy been crying?' she asks, nestling into Emem's tear-streaked face.

'Mama fine,' says Emem, smiling. 'We just did something very hard, but also something we really needed to do.'