

# GRENOBLE ECOLE DE MANAGEMENT

## CONCOURS HEC SESSION 2013

### EPREUVE ORALE D'ANGLAIS

#### Script n°6

#### **The working poor**

By Rowenna Davis

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There is a mum in the Cotswolds who creeps about her living room. Silently when her children aren't looking, she gathers up toys around the edges. Maybe a teddy bear, maybe a colouring book. She's tired after work, but she's picking them up now so she can hide and wrap them later. By the time Christmas comes around, her children might think they're new. You wouldn't expect this mum to need a food bank. She is not a single parent. Both she and her partner are in work. They don't live in a council house; they have a fixed rate mortgage in the leafy heart of southern England. This family didn't want to speak out for fear of judgement, but the old stereotype of who goes hungry is changing. We need to catch up with the new reality of the working poor.

As Britain teeters on the brink of triple dip recession, some 230,000 people are expected to turn to food banks this year. That's an annual increase of 80 per cent. In the run up to Christmas, there are reports of fights breaking out across the country's 290 food banks as household budgets are squeezed tighter by heating bills and Christmas presents. Food banks that once served a problematic, difficult minority are now helping many in the mainstream. Kate is one of the stories behind the statistics. She's a dinner lady at a local school in Poplar, East London. She lives alone with three kids. Her finances were always on the brink, but when her youngest child was born eighteen months ago, it pushed her under. When the school liaison officer called around to check why Kate's children weren't at school, she found them at home with the gas off to save heating bills, sleeping on mattresses on the floor.

There's something terrifying about a woman who works serving dinners for a living being unable to nourish her own children. Kate still works part time on £475 a month. She wants to go full time, but when she tried that the money she lost through qualifying for council tax and other benefits pushed her into rent arrears. Working tax credit already prevents her from getting free school meals. She literally can't afford to work.

"You do feel scared and a bit ashamed, because it's you that brought your kids into this world, and you should be able to feed them and look after them. But they (the food bank) didn't judge. If it wasn't for them the bailiffs would be coming."

So what's going wrong? Kate is a responsible mum and a master budgeter. She can tell you the price of every nappy brand, broken down according to different supermarket chains. She knows the price of milk formula by heart and where it's on special offer. The problem is that no matter where you shop, the cost of basic goods outweighs your income. For millions of families working out the household budget on the back of an envelope this Christmas, the figures just don't add up.

“It’s never the luxury things like wine and cars that go up,” says Kate. “They put up bread, milk, nappies, bus fares, train fares. But the wages and benefits haven’t kept up. My wages used to cover all the basics and now they don’t. How do I buy all these bits when they cost more and more money?”

The rising cost of living has coincided with another trend – the changing nature of the jobs market. Skilled blue collar jobs with decent pay and reliable hours have been replaced by low pay, white collar jobs on zero hour contracts. Jobs with decent salaries that allow people space to nurture a family seem out of date and old fashioned. Top executives might have got richer, but the middle is getting poorer.

The area with the highest proportion of people being helped is actually the south west of England, where one out of 120 children eat from food banks. This makes complete sense, given that the cost of living is much higher than in the north. Low wages always put people at risk of poverty, but they get a whole lot more dangerous when local house, food and energy prices are higher.

The demographics of people visiting food banks are surprising too. According to the Trussell Trust, some 16 per cent of people who receive help from food banks are aged 16-24, whilst barely 1 per cent are pensioners.

On the surface, the food bank looks like a sticking plaster for a broken benefits system, but in too many cases the benefits system is itself a sticking plaster for a broken economy.