
Breaking Broken Britain

THERE IS A LOT WRONG WITH BRITAIN. In fact there has always been a lot wrong with Britain; since the founding of the state with the union of Scotland and England in 1707, or if you fancy a later date, 1801, with the creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Whatever date you choose you could easily form the view that Britain was broken. From the catastrophes of the enclosures, the suppression of reform in the 1790s, the suspension of *Habeas Corpus*, the Highland Clearances, the new Poor Law of the 1830s, the Great Famine in Ireland, the Great War in France, the 'Hungry Thirties', the bombing of Coventry or Bristol, Plymouth or London, or the end of coal mining and the demolition of most heavy industry in the 1980s, there has been no shortage of times in which Britain could be said to have been broken.

So it is curious that Iain Duncan Smith should be so convinced that Britain is broken right now, when despite all our problems most people are better fed, better clothed, better educated, and better housed, than ever before. Of course the ten to twelve million people at 'the bottom of the heap' have an extremely tough time. Being poor in modern Britain is no joke, but then, being poor has never been a laugh. For whatever reason, being underemployed, unemployed, or unemployable, has always been a passport to misery and deprivation of one kind or another. So what is it about our present predicament that makes Tories in general and Iain Duncan Smith in particular think that Britain is Broken?

Apparently, it is "family breakdown". According to Iain Duncan Smith and his Centre for Social Justice it is the small number of marriages and the high level of divorce, which is the key driver of poverty in our

society. Indeed, when the Office for National Statistics reported that the rate of marriage in England and Wales in 2007 was the lowest for 112 years, the Tory poverty campaigners took this as a prime piece of evidence for the brokenness of Britain. Are we supposed to conclude that Britain was not broken in 1895 when marriage was popular and the poor had it easy? No, of course not. To be fair, the staff of the Centre for Social Justice wouldn't say that, but they do seem to believe that something has gone seriously wrong, and that things were, in some unspecified and unfathomable sense, better in the past.

Indeed it is absolutely true that social discipline and self-sacrifice, shame and dishonour – ostracism for those who break the rules – were far stronger in the past than they are today. At any time before the sixties social cohesion was certainly maintained by a common distrust of those people who lacked either the preparedness or the stamina to accept their lot in life. Public institutions and popular culture was fiercely judgemental. People who couldn't hack it as hardworking, conventional, responsible members of society, were sharply condemned and, wherever possible, firmly excluded from everyday life.

This impulse towards the exclusion of everybody who didn't 'fit in' included the halt and the lame, the queers, the unmarried mothers, the drunks and gamblers, the Irish, the blacks, and the foreigners, the angry and the just plain mad; indeed, anybody who, for whatever reason, disrupted the cohesive, homogeneous view of life which then prevailed, had to be swept under the carpet, concealed in plain sight under a blanket of respectability, or hidden away in institutions of one kind or another. Consequently, life in the past, life before personal freedom and easy access to welfare payments messed everything up, life before – say 1965 – does seem to have been much more orderly and unbroken.

Those who believe that Britain is Broken believe that the 'fad' for individual rights and respect for self-expression and self-determination have blunted the

sense of duty and responsibility of the poor. They believe that “the liberal establishment” has created a world in which individual rights and welfare dependency have condemned the poor to “a life devoid of hope and dignity”. This is why they say Britain is broken. It is broken because trade unionists, Labour politicians, and liberal chatterers believed in attacking the hypocrisy of the past, and in weaving a safety net that caught all, the *deserving* and the *undeserving*, without distinction.

This is what the Centre for Social Justice and Iain Duncan Smith want to unravel. They want to reintroduce a sense of personal responsibility, duty, and self-discipline into the life of the underclass by ending disorder and dependency amongst the poorest twenty per cent. According to them there are just “five drivers of poverty”: family breakdown, welfare dependency, educational failure, addiction to drugs and alcohol, and serious indebtedness.

Curiously, these “key drivers of poverty” look to me as much like the *consequence* of poverty as its *cause*. Indeed, it was ever thus. The exquisite and tantalising relationship between misconduct and misfortune has always been accompanied by the need to distinguish between the *deserving* and the *undeserving* poor. In the past the degree to which a person’s own improvidence or misbehaviour had contributed to their poverty could be calculated, and the degree of charitable assistance that they deserved could be finely calibrated by the gentlemen in charge of the public dole. However, in a situation in which welfare payments are universal and are applied, *as of right*, the distinction between the *deserving* and the *undeserving poor* has fallen into disuse. The language of “entitlement” has come to dominate.

The Centre of Social Justice has been brought into existence to put a stop to this; they want nothing less than a cultural revolution. Iain Duncan Smith, ably assisted by Pippa Stroud, the Reverend Phil Blond, and many others who have seen the light, are now in full hue and cry; they intend to drag down the “liberal

establishment”, to tear it to pieces, all on behalf of the benighted millions living on mean streets and in dump estates everywhere.

However, their fortunes have waxed and waned over the last seven years – they waned particularly during the recent general election when the Big Society and Broken Britain, like the scale of the National Debt, was addressed, if at all, in somewhat muted terms. Now, that Osborne, Cameron and Clegg have announced their intentions to shrink the state by some fifteen per cent, the star of the Centre for Social Justice is rapidly rising again. Iain Duncan Smith, the Secretary for Work and Pensions, is now in charge of the reform of the welfare state. He is going to allow people to escape the poverty trap by cutting welfare.

The virtue of this strategy is that it is thoroughly cost-effective. The long-term unemployed will not find work – not in the overcrowded labour market generated by ConLibDem cuts – but they will, along with most of the population, get less of everything. Attacking welfare dependency has another advantage, it is extremely popular with the middle class and with the mass of working class people, who cannot stand the idea of layabouts and freeloaders living on benefits while they have to struggle and strive for every penny. So all those committed to saving the poor from themselves by cutting benefits and promoting self-reliance throughout the underclass have finally come into their own.

In a world where Nick Clegg promotes raising the state pension age as an opportunity for a “rewarding retirement”, how can the Centre for Social Justice fail? Liberating the unemployable from relying on benefits, while doing nothing at all to make them employable, is all of a piece with helping the elderly by taking away their pensions and bus passes.

We clearly need some fast thinking about how to deal with these charlatans because we certainly cannot rely upon trade union officials, the Miliblands, or the shambolic promise of Diane Abbott. Somehow we need to stop them Breaking Britain.