

In defence of children; the demonized minority

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I have been at Barnardo's for about a year and a half after 23 years' working with offenders, including seven years leading the Prison Service and three years leading both prisons and probation. This article is about what life is like for many of our children in the UK and our attitudes to those we term 'problem children'. My views are shaped by my path to Barnardo's. I remain of the decidedly unfashionable view that custody can work, even for children. We should be able to provide a secure residential setting in which we can take the chaos out of young peoples' lives but despite very significant increases in funding, massive expansion in investment in education, and improvements in drug treatment, efforts are persistently overwhelmed by the numbers we incarcerate.

Children and young people

I have been at Barnardo's for long enough to reflect on what life is like today for children in the UK. Are things as bleak for children here as UNICEF has suggested?

For most children in the UK things are not remotely that bleak. Most of us with children have been able to bring them up during a period of previously unimaginable affluence. The problem is the large minority of children left behind: there are 3.6 million children in the UK living in poverty.

Government policies like Sure Start and tax credits have made a difference and we have 700,000 fewer children in poverty than in 1997. However, this progress has faltered and the number of children living in

poverty has stopped falling and has now begun to rise again.

All major parties are committed to eradicating child poverty by 2020 but very few senior politicians in any party right now will have a senior political role by 2020. In political terms, with potentially four general elections between now and then, 2020 might as well be in the next geological period.

Accordingly, at the moment, and from all three parties, we have the intellectual dishonesty of a commitment to eradicate UK child poverty by 2020. It's dishonest because it is not backed up by any sort of strategy toward achieving it. We need to change this. Sometimes I wonder whether I might not prefer an honest acknowledgement, now, that the 2020 target will not be achieved, if it were accompanied by a convincing plan which might demonstrate that a significant reduction in poverty short of eradication might be taken seriously. But even that will necessitate a change in the way the public, media and politicians think about poverty and their understanding of its harsh reality in the UK in 2007.

Last year, the Fabians produced an extremely good study of poverty and life chances. What was perhaps most depressing in that study was the evidence of declining public sympathy since 1997 for the poor, particularly for families living on benefits. Our challenge at Barnardo's and in the End Child Poverty coalition, which I chair, is to try and change that. To achieve what the Fabians have called 'a revolution in empathy'.

We need to try to capture some of the reality of family poverty: the fact that a family of two parents and two children on benefits are not just a little bit short of the government's own measure of poverty, but £100 adrift every single week. At a time when an average family in Britain spends £443 every week, after housing costs, we demand that a family of two parents and two children survive every single week on just £198.

Social mobility

Poverty is now more likely than ever before to capture poor children for life. For those of us born in the 1950s and 1960s, social mobility was relatively easy. There is growing and worrying evidence that the chances now of someone growing out of poverty has significantly declined.

The harsh reality is that unless government intervenes we are in danger of locking children born in poverty in the UK right now into poverty in adulthood, invariably ensuring poverty for their children.

Affording a reduction in poverty

There is, I fear, an accepted wisdom that eradicating child poverty is simply too much to ask: that we can't afford it. In the next three years, UK public expenditure will total about £1,760 billion; about £96 billion on defence, about £330 billion on health and £230 billion on education. Just £4 billion during this three-year period, about one fifth of one percent of public expenditure, would take a million children out of poverty. But if your priorities are providing further tax relief for the 17 million relatively prosperous people who have ISAs; if your priority is to reduce inheritance tax; or to discomfort the Tories by cutting income tax for all but those who earn the least; if your priority is to reduce corporation tax, already lower in the UK, before the budget, than in many other European countries, then I suppose there isn't much left for children mired in poverty.

The moral and economic case

It is simply obscene for a country as rich as the UK, a country in which so many of us have prospered in recent decades, for us not to share some of our growing prosperity with those living lives of impoverishment.

There is also the economic argument. A recent study in the USA by the Centre for American Progress has concluded that the cost of failing to tackle poverty there in terms of the future health costs, in terms of the

diminished future contribution to taxation which will be made by those in poverty, and the costs of crime which the poor will commit, amounts to (\$500 billion) or almost 4% of US GDP. A similar economic, as well as moral, case applies in the UK.

Education

Child poverty is compounded by poor education and there is worrying evidence that education, seen traditionally as the road out of disadvantage for young people, is a road which is becoming more difficult to navigate.

Here again, the widening of inequality is apparent. Most children do well at school. Many more children than we might have imagined 10 or 20 years ago get five GCSEs. The proportion of children going to university has leapt forward. But, once again, the gains of the majority expose the widening educational disadvantage of the significant minority.

Despite the success of most children in education, we produce a worryingly large number of young people who finish their school years (although there might have been precious little schooling during those years) not only ill-equipped for work but convinced that the world of work is nothing to do with them.

Why does that happen? Because all too frequently, the most disadvantaged children go to the worst schools. This is demonstrated most visibly with children in care. These are the 80,000 children in the UK, whose only crime is not to have parents who can or will support them. We step in as so-called 'corporate parents' and we send them to the worst schools. We move them from school to school, often in their GCSE year. Only 7% of looked after children get five or more GCSEs; and by the time they are 18 most are out of education or training and are unemployed. Eventually, we lock many of them up.

The education market

Disadvantaged children should go to the best schools, not the worst. And the fact that most schools might be improving is no consolation if the poor continue to go to the worst schools.

In this respect, we need to be nervous about widening parental choice. The understandable, indeed the persuasive theory surrounding the move toward greater choice in education, is that the gains from greater choice by parents will compensate for widening inequality between schools. So, although some schools may improve faster than others, all will improve. But there is some emerging evidence here that school competition might be increasing inequality, and that with the most disadvantaged families least able to exercise choice, pupils from relatively advantaged backgrounds will increasingly end up concentrated in the best schools with the best results.

Children do not start school with an equal chance of success. Children from poorer households begin to fall behind less able children at 22 months. The harsh reality is that schooling widens that inequality rather than reducing it.

I welcome the secretary of state for education and skills, Alan Johnson's, determination to over-ride local authorities' allocation procedures and send children in care to the very best schools. I hope he might not stop there.

Youth justice

I have already explained that I don't share the view, held by many in my sector, that we should not lock up children. In the main, I think such views are little more than a self indulgence. Children can, and do, terrible things and many of them are very dangerous.

But the numbers we lock up in what are, essentially, prisons, is shameful. We have gone far beyond the incarceration of the truly dangerous to the imprisonment of

many more lesser offenders. And we put them in a prison environment where the prospects of rehabilitation are remote.

Douglas Hurd, when home secretary, coined the famous phrase that 'prison was an expensive way of making bad people worse'. And without political opposition in either House, he conceived of a Criminal Justice Act which emphasized community penalties rather than imprisonment. When later, in 1997, we began the preparations for what became the Youth Justice Board, that emphasis remained.

Since 1997, crime has fallen. But the numbers of children we lock up has, despite the efforts of the YJB, and despite the introduction of genuinely demanding community punishments, has steadily increased. This is partly because we have changed the law so that it is possible, in exceptional circumstances, to imprison children as young as ten for less serious crimes than previously. Last year 776 children aged between 10 and 14 were sent to custody for crimes that were less than 'grave' (which is generally murder).

Asylum-seeking children

Finally, I want to mention asylum-seeking children, specifically, asylum-seeking children who are HIV+. I do this not simply because of the importance of these children, but because of what I believe it says about our attitude to children in the UK.

Some weeks ago, I stumbled across a group of children and mothers at a Barnardo's project in the north west of England. I wanted to see how we supported the families, all asylum seeking, and in particular how we helped them cope with the reduced benefit levels we inflict on them, almost as a punishment for seeking better lives for their children. I noted that in one of our biggest cities, Barnardo's has routinely to issue food parcels. One of the families I met, a mother and father and an 11 year old, are failed asylum-seekers and awaiting deportation. They have

no right to benefits. The local authority who have a duty under the Children Act 2004 to support them provide this family with £46 a week in Asda vouchers: £46 a week is destitution by any UK measure.

That sort of treatment is shameful enough. But what disturbed me so much more was meeting a mother who talked to me about her imminent repatriation with her 13-year-old son to Malawi. Both mother and son are HIV+. Here in the UK they are both well. But when returned to Malawi, where there is very limited treatment for HIV, no paediatric regime at all, and where life expectancy is in the low 30s, there is no doubt about what will happen. We believe there are about 20 such children in the UK and we are continuing to fight for them to be allowed to stay here.

I mention this because of what our treatment of these children says about our decency and our compassion. And it reminds me, in the year in which we celebrate the abolition of slavery, of how much more has to be done before we view the imminent deaths of a few African children in the same way we would view the deaths of white British children.

We just don't care

What has happened to our moral compass? Not just in relation to HIV+ children, but more broadly in terms of inequality and child poverty. We could save the lives of this handful of children. We could transform the life chances of the disadvantaged by getting them to the best schools, and we could drastically reduce child poverty. And in doing so, in terms of our own wealth and prosperity, we would barely notice. So if we don't address these issues, poverty in particular, the only conclusion can be that, as a country, as a people, when it really matters, so long as our own are doing nicely, we simply don't care about children. ■