

We pay to have an underclass

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By Simon Heffer

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There have been few more tragic aspects to the sickening murder of Rhys Jones than the sight of his poor mother urging the murderer to give himself up, or for his parents to do it for him. In that cry of pain we saw the dislocation of our society at its most raw. Melanie Jones and her husband are decent people with jobs in the private sector and who provide for themselves. They have a value system not just in which people act morally and with a sense of responsibility, but also where the concept of "parents" prevails. Sadly, most of this, if not all, cannot remotely apply to the animal who shot their little boy.

What do we imagine of the "parents" to whom Mrs Jones appealed? The father of the animal may have had no contact with him since the womb. Does his mother know he has killed someone? It is hard to believe she does not; but failures of morality did not begin with this young generation.

That the murderer is riding around a housing estate with a loaded gun - never mind using it - suggests morality is an alien concept to him at least. Is it likely that he will act like the decent person Mrs Jones, with her equipment of conscience, imagines he might, at heart, be? Is he quaking with remorse and regret at the evil he has done? I doubt it. If his presumably drugged state will allow - and we know that in such areas children of 11 and 12 are often addled by something or other - he might just be feeling a reflex of nauseating self-pity. He could, though, console himself that, in time, should the police ever catch him, he can at least rely on armies of bleeding heart social workers and probation officers to help him "come to terms" with such emotions.

Which brings me, I am afraid, to my main point.

Janet Daley made some excellent points in this space on Monday about how failed parenting causes incidents such as this; and about the failure of authority. There is one further point. Has anybody noticed that the more we spend on the underclass, the bigger it gets and the worse it behaves?

Has anyone noticed, either, that what we used to call the working class has shrunk? Not merely because, as surveys tell us, so many now think of themselves as "middle-class", but because something called the respectable working class has almost died out. What sociologists used to call the working class does not now usually work at all, but is sustained by the welfare state. Its supposed family units are not as the rest of us might define the term. It lapses routinely into criminality and lives in largely self-inflicted squalor. It has low educational attainment and is bereft of ambition. It is what we now call the underclass.

We have an underclass because we pay to have one. I do not mean that to be a glib remark, from which it could be inferred that, if we were to stop paying for one, it would magically disappear. What I mean is that 60 years of welfarism, far from raising people out of poverty

and of the vices that sometimes (but not inevitably) go with it, has simply trapped them there. Welfarism has smashed the traditional, and vital, family unit. The state readily takes responsibility for families if those who should be running them decide, in part or in whole, to abdicate it. The huge outlay of money that allows this to happen is represented by politicians - and not exclusively those of the Left - as a great act of humanity and philanthropy. It is nothing of the sort. It is, rather, an act of sustained and chronic cruelty, and it leads to such horrors as happened in Liverpool last week.

That welfarism should allow people to pass their duties to the state was certainly not envisaged by Beveridge when he drew up his blueprint for a welfare system in 1942. As a Liberal of the best sort, Beveridge saw his job as to design a safety net for those who, in distressing scenes in the 1920s and 1930s, had lived in dire poverty owing to mismanagement of the world's main economies after the First World War. The Attlee government interpreted Beveridge differently, and ensured that welfare instead would provide a career structure for those who chose not to work, or not to provide for their families.

That was bad enough; but real toxicity has been created by combining this destructive profligacy with a liberal experiment in criminal justice that has now utterly failed, and with the sacrifice of our state education system on the altar of Marxism. Given how many of our young grow up without any moral example in their lives, without discipline or serious learning at school, and in the knowledge that the police will not confront them or, if they do, that the courts have little power to punish, it is small wonder we have pockets of lethal anarchy throughout the green and pleasant land.

It is easy to justify the compassion and sentimentality that made the mainly middle-class Attlee government pursue a more blanket welfarism than Beveridge intended. In the immediate post-war period, what was then the respectable working class lived in often frightful conditions. Especially in bombed-out urban areas, the accommodation was cramped, primitive and temporary. Things that even the poorest person today takes for granted - mains drainage, proper sanitation, a cheap power supply - were frequently unknown. It was right to want something better. But it was wrong to want it at the price of stripping people of what had always been their responsibilities for themselves and their families, and of removing all incentive to get on in life and to provide for themselves.

Many of the "solutions" to our social problems that have been trotted out since Rhys Jones was killed are right. Given the mess we have allowed to be made, a dose of authoritarianism is needed: more police being more vigilant, catching more criminals and putting them in more prisons.

But our politicians remain too cowardly to implement the prescription. The grammar schools that once helped the poor out of poverty are reviled even by the leader of the Conservative Party, who went to Eton. The scaling down of benefits to the undeserving poor, hand-in-hand with a drive to help people into work and to take responsibility for themselves and their own, is too terrifying for any political party to contemplate.

We had a hint of this when John Redwood's completely sensible proposals to cut taxes - thereby stimulating the transfer of resources from public to private sector that would be essential for greater employment and prosperity - were howled down by cynics and ignoramuses in the Government (such as the otherwise usually silent Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling) as being "Right-wing": whatever that means. More depressing, the very utterance of this meaningless phrase acts like a clove of garlic to senior Tories, panicking them out of endorsing the Redwood plan with the fervour they should.

We are counselled to avoid despair about our "broken society". But when one sees the political class so utterly trapped in the headlights of failed social liberalism, what else are we supposed to do?