

British prime minister's "moral crusade" targets the poor

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Whenever a politician begins to speak about "morality", their audience should keep a tight hold on their wallets. This wise advice is worth recalling, given Prime Minister Tony Blair's declaration in last Sunday's *Observer* newspaper that he intended to create a "new national moral purpose" for Britain.

He was responding to the banner headlines about two, unrelated, pregnant 12-year-old girls in South Yorkshire. Last week, one of the girls gave birth in the bathroom of her Rotherham home. She had not known that she was pregnant. Police are questioning a 23-year-old man suspected of being the father. Days later, the newspapers revealed that another young girl, in neighbouring Sheffield, was also expecting a baby. The father in this instance is a 14-year-old schoolboy.

Almost immediately, the run-down council estates on which the girls live were crawling with journalists, seeking evidence of a moral breakdown amongst young children, and willing to pay for any salacious tidbit that would "prove" their contention. The latter undoubtedly played no small role in the schoolboy's decision to inform a specially convened press conference of his various sexual conquests. Even more delightful for the media was his claim that it was the sex education classes in his secondary school that had "turned [him] on".

The views of a working class boy—especially one with emotional and learning difficulties—are not usually of any interest in ruling political circles. On this occasion, however, they were leapt upon to bolster claims that the poor—and especially their children—are "amoral", feckless and generally out of control. Writing in the Conservative *Daily Mail*, columnist Lynda Lee-Potter opined that the reason young girls get pregnant is because "their mothers are idle sluts who aren't fit to look after a dog, let alone a child".

"Isn't it time that we took drastic action to deal with this situation", runs the official mantra. This was the line taken by Blair in his *Observer* interview. News of the two pregnancies was "appalling", he said. The issue was "complex" he went on, but his government was already taking action. They had set out proposals to force young single mothers into special hostels and were working with charities to establish more telephone help lines for those in need. Labour's new "working families tax credit"—aimed at forcing parents to take up low paid jobs—would also help, he claimed. The major issue, he continued, was that "parents have got to take responsibility for their children. 12-year-old kids should not be on the streets at night."

Labour's favoured theme is that "rights" are dependent upon

"responsibilities", i.e., that civil liberties and access to social provisions are dependent upon individuals fulfilling certain state-dictated requirements. Blair later denied that he was speaking of imposing a general curfew on children. But the following day the government attacked the reluctance of Local Authorities to implement the new "anti-social behaviour" legislation against teenagers. Under these policies, young people can be taken to court for offences such as gathering in the street and generally making a "nuisance" of themselves. They can then be subjected to a range of restraining orders, including banning them from certain areas. Home Secretary Jack Straw complained that Local Authorities had only imposed five such orders last year, and none of those involved were below 16 years of age.

On taking office, Blair had pledged to make reducing teenage pregnancies one of the government's primary targets. This, and the new "moral crusade", is not motivated by concern for the material and emotional well-being of young people, however. It is bound up with his government's drive to reduce public spending and, in particular, to slash welfare.

Recent figures reveal that under Labour, the rate of public spending will have been even lower than under the preceding Conservative governments. As a result, the Treasury was able to announce last week that it had a £10 billion budget surplus.

In the same *Observer* interview, Blair indicated that the surplus would be used to introduce further tax cuts. "No one likes paying tax", he said. "Get the fundamentals right, get the public finances sorted out, get the investment we need in public services, then get the tax cuts." The primary beneficiaries of these policies are not "ordinary families", as the government claims, but big business and the rich. Blair speaks for these layers, who bitterly resent any incursions into their wealth, and regard the remaining social provisions as wasteful expenditure. In a further statement just days later, Blair articulated these sentiments: "People are responsible for their own lives—they've got to make their own way in life."

Blair's moral sermons have a twofold purpose. In the first instance, the government is not able to state openly that its intention is to gut welfare. It invents a different purpose—that its measures are necessary to "aid" the otherwise "irresponsible" poor, and to mould them into "deserving" citizens.

Second, it serves to divert attention away from the social causes underlying issues such as teenage pregnancy. Young pregnancies are always traumatic for the individuals and families involved. When they are concentrated in already severely disadvantaged

areas, they are undoubtedly a social tragedy. This is certainly the case in the UK, which has the highest number of teenage pregnancies in Western Europe and the highest number of unmarried teenage mothers in the world.

Government statistics point out the differences between the British teenage pregnancy rate and that in the rest of Europe—twice the rate in Germany, four times that of France and seven times that in the Netherlands. The primary reason for this discrepancy is not that the number of teenage pregnancies in the UK has risen significantly. In fact, it has remained roughly steady over the last 20 years, at under 10 per 1,000. But whilst the UK rate stayed constant, European rates fell over the same period—hence the gap.

The reason is not hard to find. More than two decades ago, the British ruling class openly rejected the so-called "European model"—by which they meant the policies of social reformism based on a limited redistribution of wealth towards the working class. This they denounced as "wasteful", "outmoded" and "uncompetitive". They gazed longingly at the United States, where the process of wealth accumulation was so naked and, for the chosen few, so rewarding.

Beginning with Thatcher, the British bourgeoisie sought to emulate the US. Through a number of victories against the trade unions—which the union leadership itself played no small role in ensuring—British industry was "rationalised". Privatisation and deregulation fed the stock markets, which, combined with tax cuts, ensured a substantial growth in the income of Britain's rich.

But it was not only America's so-called "successes" that British governments have reproduced. Like the object of their affections, the UK has become one of the most unequal countries in the world. As in the US, whole industries have been laid to waste, leaving impoverished and devastated communities in their wake. Whilst the UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Europe, America leads the world. Some 13 percent of all US births are to teenage mothers and this rises to almost 33 percent for those girls with less than 10 to 12 years of schooling.

South Yorkshire is typical of the social catastrophe that these policies have produced in Britain. Coal and steel production has been virtually eradicated. Most jobs are in the so-called "service" sector, paying minimal wage rates and often lacking health and pension provisions. Education and social services have been systematically deprived of the necessary resources and are unable to effectively deal with the multitude of social problems that they confront in such areas.

Sheffield social services have reported a 40 percent increase in the number of troubled children in the city needing support or care. In just one three-day period recently, 269 new cases were referred to the department for help. Officers report that due to the pressures of poverty, drug abuse and other social problems, families are breaking down in the city at a greater rate than ever before. This means that more children of all ages—including babies—are desperately in need of assistance, but the department's budget is already £1.3 million overdrawn.

The region also has one of the highest concentrations of teenage mothers in the country. The 12-year-old Sheffield girl reported that she had become pregnant because she wanted "someone to love" and who would love her back. It is not so surprising that, given

such harsh and hostile surroundings, a young child takes drastic action to assure herself of love and a feeling of worth and purpose.

Blair's emphasis on "rights with responsibilities" has further compounded another central feature of the last two decades—the deliberate erosion of childhood. In English courts of law, children as young as 10 years old can now be held legally accountable for their actions. Ten-year-olds have been tried for murder, rape and sexual abuse. Eleven-year-olds are registered on the National Sex Offenders list. In schools, young children will be taught how to be "responsible" with their pocket money, and how to save. In short, children are, to all intents and purposes, regarded as adults, and required to act as such. How fraudulent of Blair then to react with horror at the discovery that this can work in the opposite direction too.

How does the prime minister propose to succeed in his goal of convincing youngsters "of the undesirability of having sex at 12"?

Not through education. Schools Minister David Blunkett assured right-wing pressure groups at the weekend that sex education classes in British schools—already woefully inadequate—would be further restricted. Each secondary school would have to produce a prospectus outlining their sex education lessons, which would be subject to veto by parents. Should "significant" numbers of parents object to any aspect, the school's governing body would have to remove the offending issue from the timetable.

Children are to be deterred by ensuring that they would be economically and socially stigmatised should they transgress. The government has been studying schemes in the United States and the Netherlands where underage mothers are financially penalised. In keeping with this, Social Security Minister Alistair Darling announced that teenage fathers are to be pursued for maintenance by the Child Support Agency. Being a father at 12, 13, or 14 would no longer be an excuse for boys to avoid their responsibilities, he said.



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