

# Britain: Conservative Party feigns concern for the poor—the better to oppose welfare state benefits

Julie Hyland  
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Last week the Conservative Party issued “Breakdown Britain—an interim report on the state of the nation.” The document was produced by the party’s Social Justice Policy Group (SJPG), set up by Conservative leader David Cameron and chaired by former leader Iain Duncan Smith.

The SJPG report is intended to present the “compassionate” side of the Conservatives so as to distance the party from the Thatcher era, which led to a dramatic decline in its electoral fortunes and from which it has been attempting to recover ever since. To this end, the document is filled with references to the reforming zeal of the Conservative Party, stating, “It is the party of Shaftesbury, the defender of poor children of the factories, the friend of the homeless and the founder of the Ragged Schools.”

References to the Victorian era and charitable institutions such as the Ragged Schools are indicative of the political approach to social policy that the party is offering in the twenty-first century.

In a statement, Duncan Smith also doffed his cap to One Nation Toryism, empathizing with the many families for whom “life is getting worse.” On virtually all indices of social deprivation, Britain comes out top in Western Europe—the highest rates of poverty, indebtedness, teenage pregnancy and alcohol and drug abuse, all of which are detailed in the report.

The Conservatives’ purported concern for the hardship faced by millions is nauseating. Time and again, the report uses statistics to show how, between the 1970s and the present day, the social fabric of Britain fell apart. The report acknowledges, for example, that over that period social mobility ground to a halt.

“It is less likely that a child of parents in a low-income bracket will rise to the top income bracket in 2006 than it was in 1970,” it states at one point, and, at another, that the ratio of debt to income has risen from under 50 percent “in the 1970s to over 140 percent today.”

No mention is made of the fact that throughout much of this period, Britain was run by Conservative governments which sought to destroy the social gains of the working class. Declaring that there was “no such thing as society,”

Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher set about redistributing wealth from working people to the rich and gutting public provision as part of the creation of a cheap-labour, low corporate tax base for the transnational corporations and international finance.

Beneath the weasel words on the plight of Britain’s poor, the Conservative Party is in fact seeking to justify a continuation of the same right-wing measures that produced the social catastrophe outlined in “Breakdown Britain.”

The report does so by attributing all of society’s ills not to widening social inequality, but rather to family breakdown.

Duncan Smith stated that his group had found that 50 percent of unmarried parents split up before their child was five. “We do know that children from a broken home, particularly in these difficult poverty-stricken areas, are something like 75 percent more likely to fail in education, and that leads to problems with drug addiction and failure and dependency.”

According to “Breakdown Britain,” cohabitating parents and step-parents are just as much a guarantee of social ruin—they are “undeniably a negative factor”—as single parents.

Welcoming the report, Cameron insisted, “It underlines my belief that the family is the most important institution in Britain and that if we are serious about tackling the causes of poverty and social breakdown then we must look at ways of supporting families and also supporting marriage so that couples are encouraged to get together and stay together.”

The document will no doubt be warmly received by those Tories who complain that in its efforts to win back public acceptance, the party under Cameron is in danger of making unpardonable concessions as regards the sanctity of marriage and hostility towards homosexual rights.

But the report is not simply a return to traditional Tory “values.” It makes no concrete proposals on how to encourage people to “stay together,” but preserving the family nevertheless assumes central place as an alternative to state provision of social assistance.

The report is, in fact, framed as an argument for the final eradication of all state-provided public assistance.

The Labour Party has already moved sharply away from

welfare service provision to a system of tax credits. These force people off unemployment benefits into low-paid work and subsidise employers who offer such jobs. However, the Tories oppose such measures as “unsustainable,” because they oppose any steps that are in any way redistributive. Tax credits, the report complains, will have to “*increase with average earnings* just to keep that poverty rate where it already is.” (Emphasis added).

Current government policies are especially inadequate under conditions in which “an energy crisis, a recession in the US, a global terrorist incident or a substantial fall in house prices could change the economic climate,” it warns.

The report draws a distinction between the welfare state—which it attacks for facilitating family breakdown—and the “welfare society.” This freshly-minted term is used to propose that provision for the needy be left to private charities or the “moral” responsibilities of the family.

“The welfare society is that which delivers welfare beyond the State,” it argues. “At the heart of the welfare society is the family . . . An integral and vital part of the welfare society is the voluntary and community sector.”

An entire chapter is devoted to the latter, which are described as “Third Sector Organisations.”

“In all the areas of breakdown discussed in this study, it is voluntary and community groups that often most effectively transform lives through their innovative work,” “Breakdown Britain” claims.

The charities cited most favourably are those established by big business, those which have a religious ethos, or those which are staffed by volunteers. Groups such as Tomorrow’s People, an employment charity set up by the largest multinational beer, wines and spirits company in the world, Christians Against Poverty, and the Citizens Advice Bureau have to be drawn into public provision, the Tories argue.

The report praises Labour for having gone some way towards this, noting that government is “now the biggest funder of the third sector, providing 38 percent of its £26 billion of income,” and that the Labour government has set annual targets to achieve increases in the transfer of public services to the voluntary sector. But it insists that it is necessary for government to “devote a greater proportion of the funding allocated to fighting poverty to the third sector.” All too often, it complains, government restrictions mean that Third Sector Organisations are treated as adjuncts to the public sector, whereas it is essential to ensure nothing is done to “reduce the sector’s independence.”

The pedigree of “Breakdown Britain” is clear. Packaging apart, it stands firmly in the tradition of the Thatcherite right and the racist social Darwinist Charles Murray, whose writings on the so-called “underclass” provided the ideological justification for the Conservative government’s assaults on welfare during the 1980s and 1990s. The report’s launch was filled with references to the problems posed by Britain’s

“underclass,” and “Breakdown Britain” itself singles out the working class as being especially responsible for the country’s social problems, having been tempted into inappropriate family formations “in no small measure by the establishment of a comprehensive welfare state.”

It is a measure of how accepted such right-wing nostrums have become in official political circles that the report was welcomed by the liberal media. On the day of its launch, the *Independent* newspaper cautioned that anti-Conservative prejudice should not lead people to dismiss “Breakdown Britain” “out of hand.”

Duncan Smith “has roamed far beyond the Tory shires, examining deprivation in all its shapes and forms,” the newspaper continued. “And he deserves credit for this. Whatever conclusions may be drawn from his report, he has done his homework.”

In fact, much of “personal testimony” solicited by the SJPG comes from “practitioners from charities working with the worst affected,” who, not surprisingly given the report’s recommendations on Third Sector Organisations, have overwhelmingly welcomed its findings. The remaining evidence was provided by YouGov, the Internet-based opinion pollster.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Martin Kettle proclaimed “Iain Duncan Smith’s social justice report is the opposite of a Thatcherite document of the 1980s.”

Praising the “rich Tory tradition of compassion and social justice stretching from the dawn of the industrial era to the present day,” Kettle concluded that Duncan Smith was “on to something.”

Kettle is a cheerleader for Prime Minister Tony Blair and his personal friend. And, whilst Labour sought to disparage the Conservative report, it is already piloting some of the measures raised by Duncan Smith.

Just days after “Breakdown Britain” was published, Work and Pensions Minister John Hutton announced that a new body, the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission, is to be established with the power to dock wages and withdraw the passports of absent parents who fail to make child support payments. The government has also proposed “naming and shaming” those successfully prosecuted for non-payment by publishing both their names and photographs on a dedicated web site.



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