

Gun crime claims three young lives in London

Cameron pontificates, Blair shrugs

Julie Hyland

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Despite the very best efforts of the powers that be, Britain is not yet America—at least where gun crime is concerned. All the more tragic then were the shooting deaths of three boys in London within a matter of days.

Billy Cox, aged 15, was gunned down in his bedroom in Clapham, south London, on February 14, Valentines Day. His 13-year-old sister, Elizabeth, discovered him moments after the shooting but it was too late to save him.

The motives for Billy's murder are still unknown. As always, there is much speculation—ranging from a trivial text-message row to a drugs feud.

Nor is it clear if his death is related to earlier shootings involving young boys, also in south London. On February 6, 15-year-old Michael Dosunmu was shot in his bedroom in Peckham, just two days after his birthday. His sister was also present when two intruders forced their way into the home and shot Michael, who died of his injuries at Kings College Hospital.

It is thought that Michael—described as church-going and industrious—was the victim of mistaken identity. Whether that mistake was connected to the shooting of 16-year-old James Andre Smartt-Ford is also the subject of speculation. James was shot several times at point-blank range at an ice-rink in Streatham on February 3.

The absence of concrete facts did not deter politicians and the media, however, who responded to the shootings with a mix of prejudice, hypocrisy and raw political propaganda.

Before any investigation had been completed, Conservative leader David Cameron proclaimed that he knew what lay behind them. The killings, he opined, were the product of “family breakdown.”

Cameron told GMTV, “When you look at the people caught up in these events, what you see is a complete absence in many cases of fathers, and a complete presence of family breakdown ... let's start the big culture change of encouraging responsibility in our country.”

“We urgently need to reform the law, and the rules around child maintenance, to compel men to stand by their families,” he went on, suggesting income-tax breaks for married couples.

In reality, it appears that none of the victims—those “caught up in these events”—came from “broken” families. And of their

parents, most were working.

None of this matters one iota to a Tory Party that is involved in a major effort to repackage its right-wing social policies as caring and compassionate. Like Margaret Thatcher before, it is fixated on single parents, and even step-families, as the root of all society's problems.

The “non-traditional” family now accounts for a large portion of all families in the UK. In Tory jargon this development is symptomatic of a working class that no longer tugs its forelock before tradition and religious dictate.

More immediately, complaints about family breakdown have the vital purpose of transforming social problems into manifestations of individual failure and irresponsibility, under conditions in which social inequality has reached proportions not seen since the Edwardian era.

Thus Cameron managed to speak about a crime that he claimed was symptomatic of the state of society, without ever dealing with that society. There was no reference to the reality of life facing many young people in inner-city areas, much less to poverty or deprivation. Again this was with good cause. In its recent policy statement, “Breakdown Britain,” the Tories proposed that the traditional family must be bolstered if it is to substitute for vital public services which it intends to cut still further. What need for elderly provision, nursery care or social welfare when a grandparent, mother or elder sibling can be made to do the job?

For rank hypocrisy, however, Prime Minister Tony Blair stole the day. Responding angrily to Cameron's speech, he insisted that the death of young Billy Cox was “not a metaphor for the state of British society, still less for the state of British youth today.”

Blair has not always been so averse to crude shroud waving. Some 15 years ago, the up and coming Labour leader was only too willing to utilize a child's tragic death to underscore his party's shift to the right and thereby his own viability as future prime minister.

In February 1992, two-year-old James Bulger was murdered by two 10-year-old boys in Liverpool. In a speech just days later, Blair—then Labour's home affairs spokesman—said that the murder was symptomatic of the state of the nation. “The news bulletins of the past week have been like hammer blows

struck against the sleeping conscience of the country,” he said, calling for people to “wake up and look unflinchingly at what we see.”

In fact, it was not the crime so much as the punishment which spoke volumes about British society. Killings by children remain extremely rare. But the fact that James’s killers came from dysfunctional families in an impoverished part of the country was consciously used by Blair and the political elite to paint a “Lord of the Flies” scenario in which feral children from Britain’s underclass ran amok in the inner-cities.

There could be no reasoning with such creatures, much less understanding them, went the official mantra. Denunciations of the “mollycoddling” welfare state were accompanied by the denigration of a “mollycoddling” legal justice system.

Under the banner of balancing “rights” with “responsibilities,” draconian law-and-order measures were to be introduced, directed specifically against the young. Just to reinforce the point, in scenes that would not have been out of place in one of Dickens’s novels, James’ killers were tried as adults in the Old Bailey—the dock specially raised so that their heads might be seen above it.

Today, however, Blair cannot tolerate any examination of the state of the society that his government has presided over for 10 years. For it would show that the situation facing working families and especially the young is even more precarious than under the Tories, as Labour has systematically stepped up the redistribution of wealth away from the working class to the super-rich.

Just one day after Billy Cox was killed, the Unicef organization produced its report on the situation facing young people in the wealthiest 21 OECD countries. Drawing a direct link between widening levels of social inequality in Britain and America, and the extremely high levels of risk-taking behaviour such as substance abuse, the report concluded that the US and the UK were the worst places to be young.

Launching the report, Professor Jonathan Bradshaw, described a “dog-eat-dog” attitude that prevails as an outcome of “a society which is very unequal, with high levels of poverty.”

The Unicef findings were backed up by a report in the *Independent on Sunday* at the weekend which revealed that hospital admissions for children with alcohol-related problems had increased exponentially, with a 25 percent rise in one year amongst girls under the age of 16.

“Hospital admissions for under-18s are at their highest since records began, and the average amount children are drinking every week has doubled since 1990,” it reported. Professor Mark Bellis, director of the Centre for Public Health at Liverpool John Moores University, said, “The numbers of underage drinkers in hospital for alcohol-related conditions are substantial but it is only the tip of the iceberg. Many more children are admitted for problems not recorded as alcohol. The admissions include everything from being involved in violence

to teenage pregnancies.”

According to the statistics, levels of gun crime remain fairly constant and in London have even fallen. But in amongst this, the numbers of teenagers involved with guns have increased. Could there be any relationship between these figures and a “dog-eat-dog” atmosphere? Would not gun crime figure as the epitome of “risk-taking” behaviour?

Of course, no answer was forthcoming from either Cameron or Blair. On the questions that really matter, their mouths were firmly sealed.

In advance of its gun-crime summit with police on Thursday, Blair had pledged that new measures under consideration included longer jail sentences for people aged from 17 to 21 who are caught with firearms. It was soon pointed out to Blair that Labour had already introduced such legislation three years ago. And as the singer Mica Paris, whose brother Jason was killed six years ago in a shooting, said, a five-year sentence would solve nothing. “This is a much, much bigger problem than just adding years to someone’s life if they go to jail,” she said.

The prison population in England and Wales rose from 60,000 in 1997 to 80,000 today—143 imprisoned for every 100,000 people. The conviction rate for children doubled between 1992 and 2000. Writing in the *Guardian*, Jon Fayle, formerly of the Youth Justice Board, explained, “Compared with most countries in Europe, we lock up a high number of children. For every 100,000 children in the population, we lock up 23. The equivalent figure in France is six, in Spain it is two, and in Finland it is just 0.2.” This was not primarily the result of any increased lawlessness amongst the young, he continued, but “political mood music” which had placed law-and-order measures at the top of the agenda.

The rate of imprisonment matters especially when neighbours of Billy Cox complain that the readiness to commit young people to prison not only deprives them of work prospects but is also a significant factor in introducing them to a gun culture in the first place.

But none of the official parties have any response to the social problems created by their big business agendas other than greater repression. Indeed, the only “initiatives” coming from the government’s gun-summit were more police powers.



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