

UK politicians, media exploit children's deaths to demand further attack on welfare

Julie Hyland
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The tragic deaths of six children in a house fire in England have been seized on by the Conservative Party and the media for a vitriolic campaign against a “feral underclass”.

Last week, Mick Philpott, 56, was convicted of the manslaughter of six children aged 5 to 13 years old in a house fire he had started deliberately on May 11, 2012. His wife Mairead, 31, and friend Paul Mosley, 46, were convicted alongside him.

For 10 years, up until February 2012, Philpott lived in the three-bedroomed property in Derby with his wife and six children along with his mistress Lisa Willis and her five children. Philpott was the father of nine of the children.

When Willis left the family home, taking her children, Philpott conceived a plan to start a fire that he would blame on his former lover. His scheme was that he would rescue the children, and that his “heroism” would enable him to gain custody of their children together.

This reckless plot backfired terribly, as the fire took hold and the children could not be saved.

Sentencing Philpott as ringleader, the judge accepted he had not intended to kill the children. It was an act of “callous selfishness”, she said, by a controlling and abusive man with a history of violence towards women, including his partners.

Neither the facts of the case nor the fate of the young victims are of any real concern for the powers-that-be, however. That Philpott was unemployed and could draw benefits for his large family has become the occasion for shroud-waving aimed at justifying the complete dismantling of welfare provision.

Railing against a “feckless underclass”, breeding babies as “meal-tickets”, the media claimed that Britain's welfare state was culpable in the children's

deaths.

The *Daily Mail* screeched that Philpott was the outcome of “the socially and morally destructive disease of welfarism,” while the *Sun* expressed its “hope” that the case would be the “last time the state unwittingly subsidises the manslaughter of children.”

Chancellor George Osborne said the Philpott case raised “a question for government and for society about the welfare state—and the taxpayers who pay for the welfare state—subsidising lifestyles like that, and I think that debate needs to be had.”

He was backed by Prime Minister David Cameron, who said, “we should ask some wider questions about our welfare system, how much it costs and the signals it sends.” Welfare should not be used as a “life choice”, he said.

Such claims are completely cynical. Benefit levels are already set at a pittance. Jobseekers Allowance, for example, represents just 10 percent of the average wage. As for the child benefits that the Philpott family supposedly “milked”, this is £20.30 a week for the eldest child and £13.40 for each subsequent child.

That millions have to rely on such paltry amounts to survive is not a matter of choice but desperation. Yet even these are under assault.

Philpott was sentenced the day after the largest-ever cuts in welfare took effect in Britain.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the cumulative impact of these cuts, combined with tax rises, will see more than 9 million families lose an average of £165 a year. Tens of thousands of the poorest families—many of them dependent on welfare “top-ups” to supplement low wages—face homelessness and destitution. An additional 1 million children are to be thrown into poverty, adding to the 4 million—one in three—already poor children in the UK.

The *Times* insisted, “There should be no assumption that every family has the right to have a large family funded by the state,” while Tory politicians argued that Child Benefit should be restricted to “two, three or four children.”

Why financially penalising already poor families would have prevented the tragedy in Derby is never explained. And financially, the amount saved by limiting Child Benefit to four children or less would be minuscule, as those with larger families are a tiny minority.

Moreover, a benefit cap is already being imposed in four London boroughs as part of a plan to roll out a similar cap nationally. This will set a maximum of £26,000 per year that can be claimed by families of any size. The families affected stand to lose an average of £93 a week—plunging many further into poverty.

But there is more than filthy political opportunism involved in the campaign around the Philpott case.

It expresses the arrogance and class hatred of the bourgeoisie and the privileged petty bourgeoisie for the working class. Divorced from the realities of life faced by the vast majority of the population, this super-rich layer are the real parasites on society. There are no limits to their greed and self-interest. According to this layer, every social right won by working people must be stripped away.

It is these same class interests that account for the response of the nominally liberal media and the Labour Party towards these events.

In the *Independent*, Charlie Cooper explained that “Whether or not one accepts a link between the Philpott case and the argument for welfare reform, the tragedy has focused attention on one of the most difficult questions in modern politics: how the state should discourage people on benefits from having large numbers of children and expect the welfare system to pick up the bill.”

For its part, the *Guardian* attacked the Conservative Party for having “downgraded individual moral responsibility” in its response to the case, “by playing up the supposed role of ‘the system’.”

Earlier in the week, Labour’s shadow chancellor Ed Balls had criticised Osborne over his “calculated...use [of] the shocking and vile crimes of Mick Philpott to advance a political argument” for welfare reform.

Balls’s feint at opposition was quickly silenced. Labour blogger Dan Hodges complained that “The

Edries want lots of stories tomorrow that have the phrases ‘Mick Philpott’, ‘Welfare’, and ‘Labour defends welfare’. They’re going to get them.”

Nor for long. By Sunday, it was announced that Labour is working on plans for a “radical shakeup” of the welfare state “to counter Tory claims that it is soft on welfare.”

Amongst these are proposals to make benefit rates dependent on National Insurance Contributions, restricting unemployment allowance to one year for a young person, and measures to further tighten the allocation of social housing “to those who work and contribute to their community.”



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