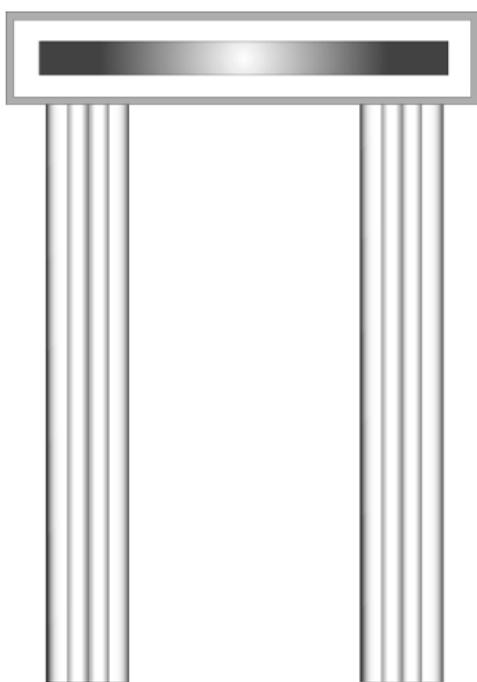


# POLITEIA

A FORUM FOR  
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC THINKING

John Bird

'I'm in the Underclass . . .  
Get me out of Here!'



*Address Series*

# POLITEIA:

## A Forum for Social and Economic Thinking

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The *Big Issue* newspaper is an international publication for homeless people and is sold by the homeless in the cities nation-wide. The *Big Issue* works on behalf of homeless and socially excluded people.

For Politeia he has written *Retreat from the Streets* (2002).



## INTRODUCTION

It's Christmas. It is time again to think of outsiders, and the children of the less fortunate. We think and feel for those who will have a poor Christmas while we ourselves hope to make the best of this season of goodwill. Last Christmas I wrote\* about how giving money to people on the streets actually keeps them on the streets – and maintains them in dependency. There are no figures that are accurate for the number of people who beg on the streets. All we know is that over the past few years more people have used begging as a means of subsistence.

This year I want to deal with a problem that affects not just thousands, but hundreds of thousands of people. Many of those who end up on the streets come from a section of the community that often is derogatorily called the underclass. No one would use this term as a sign of endearment. It is an unkind label. The unfortunate thing is that it does ring true. There is a group of people who live outside our communities, beyond what we call society. Dismantling the underclass is the most pressing requirement of our times. The continued existence of a class that to all intents and purposes is outside society is ruinous for us all. The maintenance of the underclass costs big money. Its members fill up our prisons with their crimes; our hospitals and medical services with their poor health and poor nutrition; they make many of our so-called 'failing' schools unmanageable. Policing, monitoring and controlling them is a vast waste of public time and resources. They also represent a huge waste of human resources. Among them are many talented people. Some could prove natural leaders. Instead we are spending vast sums of money and using vast amounts of government and public time on maintaining this class. I certainly do not have all the

\* *Retreat from the Streets* (Politeia, 202)

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answers, but I do not feel that recent Government initiatives and former Government initiatives deal with more than the appearance of the problem.

The latest manifestation of this too superficial response was seen at the October launch of the 'Together' campaign. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, and their officials have proposed a scheme to tackle different aspects of the problem. ASBOs (Antisocial Behaviour Orders) are the latest device which aims to attack the problem at the root. That is to say to punish and outlaw, and sometimes evict, the people who are making life hard in a community that is in need. I asked a simple question of the Prime Minister at that conference. If, I asked, we are going to get tough with those who are being anti-social in society, what are we going to do with those who provide the backdrop to the problem? The councils and the government legislation which create a fertile ground for an underclass to operate. They create social dumping grounds and no-go areas in many of our city areas, making them dangerous and threatening neighbourhoods for all, including the underclass itself. I argued that we would have to extend the concept of anti-social behaviour to the people who create the breeding grounds of failure that lead to anti-social behaviour. Yes, with the best of intentions ghettos of distress and anti-social behaviour have been created by Government and local authority alike. By accident or design we have seen vast seething estates constructed that have become the nurseries of this anti-social behaviour. The occupants of these ghettos have ended up there due to the good offices of social engineers. It is not enough to attack those who behave badly, however important it is to punish wrong-doers. We have to stop those who create them from creating more. Though we lecture the underclass, tell them off and

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interrogate them, we also, through our laws and hand-outs, ensure their continuity. We are largely impotent in the face of their endless anti-social activities. ASBOs do not go deep enough. They are a superficial response to a problem that may appear on the surface, but has a deeper history. We have to do more than merely tackle the most obvious consequences of anti-social behaviour. We have to dismantle the social machinery that is creating it. We have to cut off the oxygen that feeds the problem. And that is the question I raise in this address.

### **Defining the Underclass**

It now is felt desirable to do away with the term 'underclass'. The socially acceptable term now is 'socially excluded'. Social exclusion is in much of the literature and falls easily from the lips of civil servants and politicians. But changing the name does not change the problem. And in fact renaming may be an attempt to hide the terrible reality that there is a group of people who live and operate outside society. Their lives are painful, bitter and self-defeating, and changing the name achieves nothing.

The underclass is all too evident. Its members are to be found in our prisons, fostered under court orders. They are to be found in our streets. And they are to be found on the social security register. They are long-term unemployed. Mostly they live in social housing. They live mainly in the poorer enclaves of our cities. Their housing is often in the worst of conditions. They are to be found in the schools with the lowest attainment. They are, if they work, among the poorest paid and in the most unskilled jobs. Poorly educated, poorly housed and poorly skilled the nightmare atmosphere of their neighbourhoods conspires to de-socialise them.

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And as members of a non – or sub- society they fill the gaps in civilized life with their own demoralized, self-defeating and at times violent behaviour. The reality is that they are outside of society's rules.

So the underclass consists of the people who are left behind, in poor health, with poor social skills and opportunities. Occasionally someone escapes, and I am a case to point. But the majority have no escape routes. And with little or no incentive in life they turn to crime and other anti-social activities. Their children largely repeat their pattern. Born into the twilight world of social poverty, they will become the next generation of the long-term unemployed, the social disoriented that may end up in prison or on the streets. Or they become early statistics in the local mortuary, of interest to no one other than the coroner. It is the social predictability that makes the matter so distressing.

We may choose to believe in a self-help philosophy. We may choose to believe in a trickle-down theory. We may say its nature, not nurture, but that is beside the point. If the issue were less pressing, we would be able to have such a debate. But what has become patently obvious to me is that the social problems that ASBOs try to tackle will not address the deep-seated problems of being outsiders and the chronic failure of the education system for roughly 50 per cent of our children from this group. That means that we have a social time-bomb. It shows the ingenuity and potential within this class that some of the children survive the dire consequences of being born into a class of poverty and deprivation.

One of the defining factors in the lives of this underclass is the suspicion and mistrust that grows between those in this outsider group and the general community. There may well be reasons to

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fear outsiders. Fear and mistrust create a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. A predictable situation becomes an inevitable outcome. But the greatest ingredient that ensures the continuity of this class or group is the thinking that arises in that situation. It is the thinking of the dispossessed. It is the thinking of the defeated that enshrines them in failure. They think failure. Without breaking that syndrome of failure we will only see a continuation of self-defeating attitudes. Their philosophy is twisted into the shape of the places that they come from.

If you are born into a particular social situation it is a rare individual who will break that mould. If a public schoolboy goes to Oxford, it comes as no surprise. Likewise if a young boy from a sink estate on the edge of one of our cities ends up in a boys' prison we are not surprised. The same level of social conditioning goes into failure as into success. And in fact failure is often more expensive. When I was a boy in a reformatory, the costs needed to keep me there each week were greater than the costs of sending me to Eton or any of the top public schools. Keeping people poor is costly.

And because we have accepted the inevitability for failure we fear and resent at one and the same time the people who fall into the underclass category. If we are to challenge the underclass, then we cannot just be suspicious and fearful of them. We have to understand the ingredients that keep them in thrall to failure and defeat.

## **The Causes**

How did we get there?

The underclass I am talking about does not have a long history. There have been underclasses before. The underclass was often another term for the underworld, often mistaken by people who did not

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know the difference between dependency and crime. The underclass I am referring to is of recent origin. It has come into being since the Second World War. Much of it is the result of the collapse of the big industries where the semi-skilled and unskilled in the working class were employed. Now we have a group of people who have largely left the working class and become an entity in themselves.

Since the late 1960s a new kind of poor has come into existence. They are maintained on social security. In the late 1960s they were allowed to claim social security indefinitely. This was due in part to the decline of industry as Britain lost its markets. The level of subsistence provided by benefits ensured that the unemployed did not starve. The payments were paltry. Not an enormous amount of money was involved. Not enough to get off social security. Not enough to buy opportunity. But just enough, barely enough, to survive on. We gave a niggardly amount, just enough to create demoralization and dissatisfaction. For some critics of the social security provision, even a little is too much. I would argue that because it was barely enough to live on, it had the unintended effect of demoralising the recipients when it should have been seen as a means to tide them over. The safety net has become too tight and restrictive, having been conceived originally as a kind of trampoline - you fell but sprung right back up again. Now, you hit it and you stayed there.

In the early 1970s a distinction was finally made between work and support. Probably for the first time legally, people who were able-bodied, who could work, were allowed to live without purpose. With this one gesture we stole their birthright from those who are now trapped in dismal social and financial circumstances .Their birthright was to struggle and provide for themselves and their

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offspring. With the introduction of support we took from them meaning and purpose. We took from them the only chance they could ever have of moving up and beyond the meanness of their early circumstances. We turned them into drones. Provision came from the ratepayer and the taxpayer, through the good offices of the government and their various agencies

Yes, we took dignity and we crushed it. And we replaced it with handouts and a lack of purpose. We undermined any responsibility they might have had. We turned them into perennial children. It is not surprising that this social under-group should start to cast off all the constraints that go with responsibility and self-provision. An example of this undoing is to be found in the area of sexual activity, which, without social constraint, takes place earlier. You can bear children that you do not have to support, for they will be provided for out of the state's non-work provision.

A few years ago I went to a young mothers' project in the north of England. I sat and listened to a group of young mothers become incandescent because social security and the local authority did not provide adequately for them and their offspring. And yet ten, or twenty years before, there was no such provision at all because there was little or no need. These 14 and 15 year-old mothers were social security literate, knowing their rights, knowing their way around the paperwork. But they had no sense of responsibility. The need for responsibility had been broken in the previous generation. We broke the historical link with need, and the labour that alleviates need. And we did it to their children and we did it to their children's children.

What we enshrined in practice was that people could be brought so low that crime might actually

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appear to be the only means of getting out of poverty. We destroyed all chance for many recipients of benefit to do anything about their situation. We inflicted on them the longest prison sentence that can be imagined – a lifetime; and we also sentenced their children to a perpetual night of failure. We made wrong-doing attractive to a larger and larger section of the community. And we did it with social security paperwork and other chains to shackle those previously free. The social experiment of the welfare state has backfired. Why? Because some of the social engineers' commitment to a false sense of social justice meant that people didn't have to work for a living. The amazing state of affairs began where someone could say that it wasn't worth their working because they could get more money on social security. People were treated as statistics, not living breathing human beings, who needed meaning and purpose, in their lives. Within parts of my own family I have seen the atrophying of hope and opportunity. I have seen healthy people shrivel up before the mighty social security paymaster, who gives out niggling amounts with less care and thoughtfulness than the hardest Victorian workhouse master.

And there is an even darker side for those who ought to be helped to live successfully. For more than anything the break of the link between work and self-support has devalued the sick and the incapable, those who have often given tirelessly of their labours but now are isolated in their poverty, tarred with the brush of social failure, when all they are is poor. Such people have not been allowed the dignity of having their needs met properly because vast amounts of money have been spent on keeping hundreds of thousands of able-bodied people in servitude to the social security office.

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A vast machinery of social waste has been created. Children born into poverty must negotiate this wasteland , and if they get it wrong then a further sum of money can then be spent on them: or a prison sentence can keep them busy for a while. And then to top it all, the chances of getting anything out of prison are nil. The complaint levelled at our prison service is that there is a high degree of re-offending. Yes, you go in bad and come out worse. It is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice that someone can go into prison and come out more likely to commit crime. It is a miscarriage of the system that was created to ensure punishment and reform; on many occasions it does neither.

### **The Results**

The way that the modern underclass was constructed may not be quite as simple as I have described. But there is no doubt about the dire social results when you see families who have no need to pay rent, or make any serious effort for themselves to meet their daily needs. Because the money is barely sufficient it encourages wrong-doing, work on the black market, and whatever dodges are available to make some extra money. Getting people off of dependency is the biggest contribution we can make to their well-being. If we are concerned about children in need, then we must get them out of this self-perpetuating underclass – a place where only failure is normally possible. If at this time of the year you feel well-disposed to the needy, then do something that will enable them to pass from need to self-sufficiency. Don't accept that creating dependency is some form of humanitarian act. It is not. It is callous and harmful. And, most of all, it is self-destructive to the givers, as much as to the receivers.

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But even in the creation of dependency there was a logic. Governments, civil servants and politicians saw need. They saw social failure with the ending of work in many areas, with the de-industrialization of much of Britain. But little did these people know that by meeting that need by the means they used, they stripped people in the long term of dignity, purpose and direction. And they created a class of people so totally different from those of earlier times that it has become a mystery as to how to handle them.

There is an irony in this social failure. The underclass have also become a source of imagery and imitation for the well-provided children of the middle classes. One is forever encountering middle-class children imitating the lives of the poor who contradictorily can still afford expensive clothes and trinkets. The underclass has become a place of fun for outsiders looking in. The recent success of the slobbish family, reflecting some of the characteristics of the underclass, the 'Royle family', was a joy to its comfortable audience. I met any number of people who sang the programme's praises because they felt it was real life. But to me, the product of the underclass, it produced a sense of bemusement and anger. I do not want to see such a class exist. And if that makes TV less watchable for the comfortable, then I am happy with that. Recently at the house of a comfortable family I witnessed a 17 year-old privately educated child go 'ballistic' because he was not allowed to go down to the local high street to masquerade as a member of some hooded gang. With all the language and body movements of the socially deprived he tore into his reasonable parents. Of course the child in question can at some later age throw off the appearance of being a member of the underclass and assume his social role as an educated member of society. He can go into

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the city and earn big money. But the people he imitates can only watch as that behaviour leads them nowhere.

TV is riddled with images of an underclass fighting back. An underclass that can look for pride and dignity in their deprivation, and their lack of social opportunity. Since the Second World War a youth culture has grown up around working-class or underclass style. But let us not lose sight of the reality of - grinding poverty, suffering and children who have little or no future. Yes, we may see people rising confidently out of the underclass, but not many of them. The beneficiaries are small in number with most of the money they make being taken by promoters and managers. And they are not likely to distribute any of the proceeds of underclass success within that class itself. The world is awash with talent coming from the underclass that is exploited for the benefit of the few. We may love some of the images of the underclass, with possibly Del Boy in 'Only Fools and Horses' topping the list. Do not mistake that programme for reality. On a real housing estate, there would be many people on Prozac clinging to a twilight existence. It may make good TV, but it makes appalling life. The reality down below is grim. The estates are grim; the future looks grim. There are few honest belly laughs down there.

The love affair that well-provided society is having at the moment with the underclass leads to imitative behaviour. The wearing of baseball hats back to front is accompanied by other such affectations, such as drinking out of beer bottles. The loud, raucous and at times violent behaviour that goes with underclass life has flowed into mainstream society. What was once isolated behaviour representing a marginalized people has become *de rigueur*

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to any number of young people wishing to look and seem tough.

We may like to imitate them but we don't want to live with them. Let us therefore set them free so that they can make their own decisions and plot their own lives.

To those who would retain the present system I can only say that 'we ain't seen nothing yet'. We are at a cross-roads. We either transform this class or endure the growing 'yobification' of our lives. More and more of our streets will become no-go areas. Not just no-go for us, but for others who live in the poor neighbourhoods and in the dangerous zones of our cities. A few years ago a friend of mine who used to sell *The Big Issue* got housed. He was moved into a neighbourhood that people were trying to get out of. This man, advanced in years, was witness to countless street beatings, and was himself mugged three times. At one time he came forward as a witness in a street attack made on a young woman. The police were astonished at his stand. For in the underclass lawlessness prevails because of the fear of retribution. We all know of such horrors arising from crimes inflicted on the poor by the poor. My friend decided he had enough and went back on the streets, ending up sleeping again in a park on the edge of London.

There are countless stories of such behaviour. I believe that we can counter this decline. But it has to be tough love. It can't be more of the abdication of responsibility that we have had so far.

## **Solutions**

What is to be done?

The first thing we have to do is to recognize that the situation cannot be left as it is. It is not good enough

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merely to address the problems at surface level with moves to impose law and order and good behaviour. Furthermore, the underclass themselves are becoming restive. Talk to any police officer in a deprived area and he will tell you that the problem is growing, not diminishing. Having recognised that it is a growing problem we must then accept the urgency of finding real, lasting solutions. Most of the existing efforts to impose discipline or get people out of the underclass have not worked. As I said earlier, the prisons and social security offices are full of those whose lives are going nowhere.

The underclass continues because it is being fed and bolstered by the crude doctrines and practices of social engineers who create problems even as they try to solve them.

*First*, we have to know the extent of the problem by finding ways of measuring the failing society. We need to build models that demonstrate how problems are being created, how people are reduced to poverty. Having been involved in social intervention for many years, I am convinced that we need such a form of social mapping. Otherwise we will never grasp the true extent of the problem.

*Second*, we have to look at how best to tackle the problem. Some initiatives – by government, business and voluntary bodies - have been used to free people from the underclass: from crime, from drugs and drink. We must compile a register of the successful initiatives and try to use widely the workable ones, which show that if given the right support then people will become useful individuals contributing to society.

*Third*, and most urgently, we have to find a way of linking support to work for the able-bodied. I am not talking about those that cannot help themselves.

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If the able-bodied were removed from the benefits equation then there would be more time and money to meet the needs of those in desperate straits. How do we relate work to support? How do we get people up early in the morning, rather than spending their time watching daytime TV? Though difficult, we could certainly start tackling the job centres so as to make them centres of dynamism and excellence. They should become reservoirs of talent and opportunity; meeting places for people who could be actively looking for work, rather than going through the motions. If necessary we should provide the work. Our public spaces and places, our public buildings could do a lick of more than paint. There is certainly a huge amount of work that needs to be done in and around the housing estates in which so many of the problems fester. There are many ideas about getting a group of people back to work. Certainly a recognition that you can't be supported without making a contribution is paramount to challenging the dependency and continuation of the underclass.

*Fourth*, we need immediate ways to help the children of the underclass, so as to break the cycle of deprivation. They could be placed in the good public schools of England to be educated from an early age. These schools have done well for the middle classes – now they could be paid to take the underclass, instead of wasting the money on them for care under the local authorities – around £100,000 to keep a child in care for a year. Yet they come out under-educated and lacking in social skills. A few public schools have already started to take children from this under-performing class. The outcome has not necessarily been totally positive, but we should look to getting good middle-class education and all the opportunities that come with it to the educationally and socially thirsty. Social

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jealousy or social guilt should not stand in the way of social justice to these people who do not get a fair crack of the whip , and the public schools would provide this opportunity.

*Above all, we have to re-think the basis of the welfare state and its vast social engineering project where the culture of handouts without work is part of the larger problem of unimaginative policies and attitudes, which condemns the underclass to a lifetime in the ghetto.*

To those who would criticise these suggestions as expensive and time-consuming I would say, there is only one alternative: a drift into further decline and an increase in the spread of de-socialised people into all sectors of society. If we look overseas to the US, we see a society that is already putting up the walls, the gated communities, the armed guards to keep out the badly behaving and the sociably disruptive. Before we find ourselves too far down that road, I suggest that we re-think our attitudes about what causes such a underprivileged and misunderstood sector as the underclass.

I come from the underclass. I got out. But more than anything I am aware that those who administer the benefits system on behalf of the state – with our taxes - are often enlarging the problem. And I cannot stand idly by and watch. Enough is enough. Let us restore dignity to those that have had it ripped from them by a group of well-intentioned but misguided idealists. Now is the time to stand up and fight : to tackle and challenge dependency, not to permit its continuation.

*'I'm in the Underclass . . . Get me out of Here!'*

## **Conclusion**

I wanted to give this address because I believe that none of us want to see injustice continue, especially under the guise of social justice. I have been meeting too many people who are asking questions about government policy. Vast amounts of our money are being spent on gimmicks and programmes that have changed little. I felt that we had to grasp the unpalatable truth: that we cannot leave outsiders to themselves. And that more than anything, we have to remove the things that keep them down.

Though they are of course unfortunate, the greatest misfortune of the underclass has been to have had the woolly-minded, the impractical and the romantic to defend them. These people have supported the reactionary social engineers who have kept the underclass in subjection. Now, more than at any time, we need the hard light of day to penetrate the clouds, and illuminate the whole problem in true colours. Having left the underclass I am aware that the odd success story, like the one swallow, does not make a summer.

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The underclass is growing, says John Bird, the founder of *The Big Issue*, and with it an explosion of the costs of tackling the crime, homelessness, unemployment and poor health it brings. But the Government's schemes to combat social exclusion fail to tackle the cause of the problem – the policy of awarding benefit without having to work.

The disastrous separation of support from work has left generations of the underclass without dignity and purpose. Instead of tolerating such a system, a series of radical measures is needed to tackle the cycle of deprivation. The vast project of social engineering, which condemns the underclass to a lifetime in the ghetto, must urgently be rethought.

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