

## **Politeia Christmas Address – John Bird MBE**

### Crisis at Christmas: Preventable and Predictable?

Failing the failed at Christmas.

“A homeless person is not just for Christmas”

#### **The Problem**

Each Christmas great efforts are made to raise funds for homeless people who would otherwise lie abandoned in their doorways or their hostels. When I was homeless for periods in the sixties there was no provision for people like me. Christmas was a bad time. Thankfully those days are past. Now homeless people can have a dignified Christmas. In Christmas shelters seasonal goodwill flourishes and valuable health checks are made, giving the homeless the chance to sort out various problems.

So Christmas is now a time when homeless people can almost feel whole and human. They are made to feel wanted. Until they are put out into the often icy winds of the first days of January food, comfort and company are lavished upon them. The generosity of the public ensures that homeless people in shelters have for once a real sense of their own well-being.

The homeless form part of a well-worn Christmas crisis. It comes around again every year because we still have the homeless. The crisis is repeated annually. The homeless await their long-term solution. They have a sense of importance for about a week. For that short period of time they are not judged and not found wanting.

Then they have to return, like the rest of us, to the ordinary world. But unlike us they face a stop-gap life for the rest of the year. Back in their hostels and doorways they manage to “get by”. They are a social group who never manage to get out of their homeless lives. So the high point of Christmas only serves to illuminate the low point of the rest of the year.

Homelessness doesn't come cheap. About £1 million, on average has probably been spent on someone who becomes homeless.

Homeless people are the tip of an iceberg of social distress, the well-known face of a failing population of poor people. There are many thousands who are less visible, living in sink estates and failing communities. Coming mostly from the same social background, they represent an increasingly costly crisis.

Christmas as a crisis for the homeless – and how we respond to it – tells us much of our current culture. We are spending vast amounts of money on stop-gap solutions that keep people poor. We are spending money that should be used to get people out of the crisis

for good, rather for a trice and see enabling them to survive until they reappear as part of the next Christmas crisis.

Our crisis is a crisis of purpose. The poor may always have been with us. But they are no longer a cheap unfortunate adjunct to an otherwise healthy society. They take a vast slice of our taxes and our time. And they fill our social security offices, our courts, prisons and our hospitals in disproportionate numbers.

Christmas seems to me to drive home the fruitlessness of our efforts to use our social security system to turn poor people into full citizens contributing to society – socially engineering them into stability. Christmas help seems to me a desperate act. ‘We can’t get them straight so let’s at least give them a good Christmas’.

As I said, the homeless are the tip of an iceberg. They are what we see. But they come from the same failing social backgrounds, the same poor housing, the same violent areas, the same background of social security dependency as many of our other most abject fellow citizens. They are part of a self-perpetuating group who never seem to be able to make the most of life’s opportunities.

Most of our social engineering money goes on emergency responses: hostels, hospitals, prisons and social security payments. And we employ a vast army of people from caretakers to ASBO enforcers, from police officers to social workers who run this system.

This is why Christmas drives home to me the uselessness of our current efforts. We must find a way of breaking the cycle of failure to which our poorest people are condemned.

We must face up to the reality of the problem. It continues year after year because of the misuse of resources rather than because we need to spend more. Indeed, we spend too much on the poor already. It needs to be shifted from stop-gap measures to prevention and eradication.

This is not a simple task. Generations of politicians and social activists have tried and failed. We have to begin by recognising that the existing system lets down millions of people. Not just homeless people. But all people who are trapped in the social security nightmare. Perhaps an individual story may help us understand the problem:

In 1940 in Acton West London a car factory was converted to make parts of the wings of fighter planes. Hundreds of miles away another section of the wings was made in a former sewing machine factory. Scattered around the UK yet more sections were made in thousands of factories in what was known as “the war effort”.

All this activity coalesced into a system that mostly worked. It had its problems. It had its breakdowns. And it had its oversupply in certain areas and its undersupply in others. But overall it was orchestrated to purpose. If you were to listen to the government and some of the people who provide for the needy you would think that there was a similar orchestration. That there existed a joined up sector for social improvement.

But none such exists. Anarchy rules. We are not reaching objectives. Rather we are spending more and more money for less and less delivery.

I feel we now should end the compromise and the defence of the status quo. The Status quo is wastefulness at a great price. Now is the time to strike against the failure of our social engineering.

### **Government Response**

The Government response rather resembles a Christmas tree. Each of the light's on it would represent a particular project or government scheme each one is separate from all the others. The government has no coherent overall view of the problems that have to be tackled. So when it wants to be seen to be taking action it resorts to yet another initiative under another government department.

Number 10, the Office of The Deputy Prime Minister, the DTI, the Treasury: all are involved in these interrelated activities. Anarchy is writ large as politicians and officials within government departments struggle to compete to produce the best results. Each department has its pet programmes, often working in the same areas of social failure, but not in tandem as part of a joined up strategy.

In the early years of this Labour Government, Mr Blair claimed that the number of registered charities had greatly increased. To Blair this was something to be encouraged. To me it is a sign of failure. Maybe Mr Blair believes that there are not enough lights on the Christmas tree of government intervention. Now that the government is supplying social charities with 34% of their income, it has become the single biggest provider of funding. What has happened is that there has been a partial nationalisation of charities, limiting their independence and their ability to be critical.

Mr Blair also declared in his government's early years that we live in an age of "giving". Mr Charles Clarke, Home Secretary and supporter of countless social initiatives has recently reiterated that.

My response is that if we live in an age of giving then we must also be living in an age of "taking". Taking is one sure-fire way of ensuring that the recipient ends up on the list of the socially failing. Taking often leads people to under perform.

As the Bible says, it is better to give than receive. To me it is obvious why it is better to be on the giving side. Givers tend to have better health, better clothes and better sleeping accommodation than takers. Takers take what they are given.

The Government response to the crisis of over-provision and under-delivery seems to be to open up more branches for fairy lights on the Christmas tree. They create or support more initiatives because they don't get the results that are needed. They enlarge the sector to overcome poor returns.

Government is notoriously inept in separating the wheat from the chaff. Often ministers will take the advice of advisers who themselves have been won over by some new panacea, only to find that it is just another palliative, happy to be generous at others expense. It would be amusing to see how easily swayed are the state paymasters, if it were not one of the greatest calamities of modern life.

## **Costs**

How much is spent on a homeless person? To train a doctor costs about £230k. A homeless person can cost about £1 million.

We did a survey of *Big Issue* vendors. 80% of them had been in local authority care, most of them for at least ten years. It costs £2,000 a week to maintain a child in care. When they leave at the age of 16 they have the average reading age of a 12 year old. That is an investment of £1 million – a vast sum, more than it costs to put a child through the private education system – and it produces someone who in distress ends up selling *The Big Issue*.

The social security bill was £49 billion per year in 1997 when Labour came to power. Now it exceeds £75 billion. The crime bill is now over £100 billion annually and rising.

Much of this money is spent on the same people in social distress. Fortunes are spent on them, but they end up in crime or dependency. Crime and dependency are expensive symptoms of a failure to transform the lives of people at the bottom of society

Last years 100th anniversary Joseph Rowntree Trust's report said that we are spending more money than ever on social support, yet we are only making a small dent in poverty through stop gap, short term measures. In the Centennial address given by founder Jeff Mulgan explained that the experts are divided on what to do next.

Mulgan, former long term adviser to Number 10, could not come up with a positive message in spite of all the moneys spent by his political masters.

To add insult to injury apparently 30% of all social engineering funding goes on consultancy and monitoring, creating an industry that measures, tabulates and advises yet seems to change little.

## **What's Wrong?**

It is obvious that the social security budget is being spent in the wrong way. Most people “engineer” their children successfully into school, a good job so that they become citizens who contribute to society. You might call this micro social engineering because it happens within the family.

But when we macro social engineer through big government initiatives we tend to fail miserably. Virtually all of the failing people who will be attending the Christmas homeless “oases” will have been macro managed into failure at great cost. Though housing, education, local authority social work support, medical and state support have all been provided it does not enable failing people to prosper. *The poor are getting more costly with each new government initiative.*

Governments are the clumsy and naive paymasters of a system that they have little skill in operating and little ability to make more efficient. They only listen to their own carefully vetted insiders on what should be done to improve the situation.

## **Solutions**

When I started *The Big Issue* our first Christmas edition had a call to action: “New Year Solutions not New Year Resolutions.”

The point we were making was the world was full of good intentions. What we needed was solutions not empty words. Homeless people, as the tip of a social iceberg needed to be seen as representative of a bigger failing section of society. The homeless were like an advance guard of the socially failing. To sort them out you had to tackle the “failing mechanisms”; the failing social housing, the failing schools, the failing parents, the failing social security system that almost encouraged people to become dependent.

Ten years after our launch I was asked what I wanted to do for the next ten years. I said I had spent ten years mending broken clocks; now I wanted to prevent clocks going wrong.

To me the solution will not be found through yet more “Christmas lights”. A hundred thousand more social initiatives however good they are, would only respond to failure that has happened. It is preventable – and we should stop it happening.

All the big money is on emergency. All the big money is spent on making do, on stop gap’ism. On providing services once the problem has happened. From prisons to hostels, from social workers to a life on benefits.

We know that Social engineering tends to work within our own families, though we may not choose to call it such. The extra lessons, the adventurous holidays, the health giving food all lay down the basis of sociability.

But we also know that the institutional providers when family life has gone wrong do not seem to cope. They provide the material for social failure, even though they cost ten fold what it would cost to bring up a child in a caring family home. We have to break our dependency on big spending for small outcome. We need to address the system that

solves one problem by causing another. That helps the fallen only to make them dispirited and dependent.

Prevention needs to be the key to the future. We have to develop the tools that will support us in this endeavour.

We cannot deny that there are emergency needs. But each emergency intervention has to be coupled with help to independence, wherever possible. We have to look at the big oxygenators that create social failure. As I have said before, the housing, the parenting, the social security, the education that is being offered.

We need to rethink our way of approach so that we get Preventative action and not only emergency responses.

One Christmas a vicar of a church opened up his crypt to young homeless people. He provided food for them. He provided help. In the process he created one of the biggest social growth industries in post war Britain. It was not wrong for him to solve a problem and fulfil a need. But it became the orthodoxy. From then on it was all about response to crisis. And once the crisis got bigger then the crypts and the halls, and the converted cinemas became more plentiful. But none of these actions ever stopped one person falling into the emergency. Rather they encouraged better emergency delivery.

For all their ingenuity the quarter of a million social charities in England are not like the “war effort” of 1939-45. They do not come together to deal with all needs. Collectively they do not reduce the number of people who need their aid. They do not stop others taking the place of the saved and transformed.

I say we have to cut off the supply of the needy as much as we help the needy. And for all the rhetoric that surrounds governmental action it panders to an increasingly expensive status quo. A status quo that soon no one will be able to afford.

### **What can be done?**

The solutions to poverty, homelessness and lives broken by mental illness or drug or alcohol addiction, will not be easy. But certain things we know already. The answer does not lie in spending money: indeed money has been spent, no squandered, on paying the poor to remain poor, paying the hopeless to remain dependent and to fail. The state has been paying people to fail. It has been paying government departments to help people to fail; and it is also paying charities to help those without hope to remain in dependency. Instead we need to have a policy of prevention, to substitute preventative action for the many failed ‘solutions’ with which we have been inundated.

The first step is for the state to remove itself from the policy of state-sponsored failure for which others foot the bill.

Next, there must be a clear sense of purpose, of helping people to build lives with the support they need. Different people need different sorts of support. The homeless, those living on the streets or in hostels, those living in abject poverty have different problems and need different sorts of help.

The mentally ill, who cannot take care of themselves and are abandoned to the streets, to hostels and doorways, need to be taken care of. They need stable long-term care and the right shelter. Legislation under the Mental Health Act allows for the protection of people who are a danger to themselves and to the public. We need places of safety so the mentally ill have a home and the support needed to treat their illness. Those addicted to drink, or drugs, need accommodation where they will have stable and determined support to counter or control the addictions.

The able-bodied homeless, the unemployed, the rough sleepers? They need to be encouraged into decent, safe accommodation, without the violence and theft many fear in to-day's hostels. They need the stability and training on which to build a slow return to working life. And for the unemployed, poor, also paid by the state to fail, often with homes? Ways must be found of removing the able-bodied from benefits, encouraging them to work, to make a start, somewhere.

And what about the children, those young lives, sentenced to grow up in care, often transferred by local authority edict from placement to placement? We must restore sense to the system so that stable family life can be recreated for them from the earliest age. Instead of spending upwards of £1million pounds on paying for a child to fail, we need to make it more possible for them to have the support of a family-like structure with two committed parents from the youngest possible age and provide good education in independent or maintained schools. Above all we must recreate family life and opportunity.

Society needs to recreate these structures so that the poor, failed by the policies of the better-off, can have a second chance.