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# The Myth of 'Broken Britain': Welfare reform and the cultural production of ignorance

Author: Tom Slater

Address for correspondence:

Institute of Geography  
School of Geosciences  
University of Edinburgh  
Drummond Street  
Edinburgh EH8 9XP

Tom.Slater@ed.ac.uk

# **The Myth of ‘Broken Britain’: Welfare Reform and the Cultural Production of Ignorance**

## **Abstract**

This article draws on Robert Proctor’s concept of “agnotology” (the cultural production of ignorance) to argue for a better understanding of how contemporary policy elites and politicians ignore overwhelming scientific evidence that sits at odds with their reforms. I trace the attack on the British welfare state by the current Coalition government back to the emergence of the *Centre for Social Justice* (CSJ) think tank, founded in 2004 by current Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan-Smith following his short visit to a stigmatised district of Glasgow in 2002 when he was leader of the Conservative Party. Despite wide-ranging social scientific evidence challenging the numerous policies on work, welfare and poverty that have been set in motion by the Coalition (heavily influenced by the CSJ), a familiar litany of social pathologies (family breakdown, worklessness, anti-social behaviour, personal responsibility, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock childbirth, dependency) is repeatedly invoked in a strategic deployment of ignorance with respect to alternative ways of addressing poverty and social injustice. Powerful structural forces that involve major political and economic institutions have been conflated into a single behavioural and cultural explanation – ‘Broken Britain’ – where ‘family breakdown’ is now identified as the central problem to be tackled by the philanthropic fantasy of a ‘Big Society’. My analysis argues for a better understanding of the relationship between information and power, and how certain terms are used to *select* and *deflect* reality.

“Language sets everyone the same traps: it is an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings. ....What I have to do then is erect signposts at all the junctions where there are wrong turnings, so as to help people past the danger points.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein [1931], 1970: 18

## **The ‘Quiet Man’ goes to Glasgow.....or Damascus?**

On 10<sup>th</sup> October 2002, Iain Duncan-Smith, the ex-military Thatcherite who led the UK Conservative Party from September 2001 to October 2003, delivered an excruciating speech to the Party’s annual conference in Brighton. After two heavy defeats in the 1997 and 2001 UK General Elections, the Tories were in the political doldrums, and many felt that they might be facing extinction. Whilst Conservative backbenchers were fighting amongst themselves, Duncan-Smith was fighting off numerous accusations from fellow MPs and the media that he lacked the charisma to make the Conservatives a viable challenge to the dominance of New Labour. His response in his speech was an attempt to turn these accusations into a positive attribute: “Do not underestimate the determination of a quiet man.” In the months that followed, he was never allowed to forget his remark - MPs (of all political stripes) made “shush” noises whenever he prepared to speak in Parliament, and he was widely ridiculed by the media. One year later, as members of his Party were grouping together to launch a vote of no confidence in his leadership, he concluded his speech to their annual conference with these words: “The quiet man is here to stay, and he’s turning up the volume.” One month later, he resigned. Very few thought that he would ever be seen again in frontline politics in Britain.

In the midst of his tortured tenure as Party leader, the quiet man made a quiet visit (in February 2002) to Easterhouse, Glasgow, in the company of social policy professor turned ‘Christian-socialist’ community organiser Bob Holman. Easterhouse is one of the poorest urban districts in Glasgow (and therefore in Scotland and the UK), and Holman is one of the founders of FARE (Family Action in Rogerfield and Easterhouse), a local faith-based charity that states its mission to be “a response to the lack of support and opportunities in the community, especially for families and young people”, achieved through “offering activities that improve people’s aspirations, enhance people’s standards of living, and tackle territorialism and related violence.”<sup>1</sup> Holman walked Duncan-Smith around the streets of Easterhouse before showing him some of projects and activities set up by FARE. Following the visit, the two remained in frequent contact and became friends. Holman (2010) commented thus on their first meeting;

“I was impressed by his willingness to take local residents seriously.....a politician who almost wept at the plight of the poor. I have observed his rare gift of being able to listen to and communicate with people crushed by social deprivation.”

Duncan-Smith himself has on many occasions spoken of his first visit to Easterhouse as a life-changing experience:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fare-scotland.org/>

“Standing in the middle of an estate like Easterhouse, you know it was built after the war for a purpose, only to see this wrecked and dreadful set-up today, with families locked into generational breakdown, poverty, drug addiction and so on. And that really does confront you with the thought that we did this - we built the brave new world, and look where it’s gone. It was a sort of Damascene point. It’s not that I wasn’t thinking about these things before, but after Easterhouse I saw that we had to do something about it.” (quoted in Derbyshire, 2010)

“We did this” is not just a reference to the society that Margaret Thatcher denied ever existed, but a reference to the unequal legacy of Thatcherism, which at best showed disregard for serious questions concerning poverty and social justice, and at worst, contempt. Duncan-Smith impressed Bob Holman, and many others on the left, for his open acknowledgment of past Conservative social policy failures, and for his much-ridiculed quiet determination to address them.

Fast forward to November 11<sup>th</sup> 2010, six months after a new Coalition government took control of Britain. Duncan-Smith, now in his cabinet post of Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, started behaving as if his ‘Damascene’ moment never happened. During a morning radio interview, he stated that it was a “sin” that people failed to take up available jobs. In Parliament later that day he condemned Britain’s “growing dependency culture” whilst announcing the most punitive welfare sanctions ever imposed by a British government. Under new legislation dubbed the “claimant contract”, unemployed people will soon stand to lose benefits for three months if they refuse the offer of a job (or ‘community work’) for the first time, six months if they refuse an offer twice, and three years if they refuse an offer three times. His boss David Cameron greeted the new legislation in his usual didactic style:

“The message is clear. If you can work, then a life on benefits will no longer be an option. If people are asked to do community work they will be expected to turn up. If people are asked to apply for a job by an adviser they will be expected to put themselves forward. If people can work and they are offered work, they will be expected to take it. This is the deal. Break the deal and they will lose their unemployment benefit. Break it three times and they will lose it for three years.” (quoted in Wintour et al, 2010)

The mutation of Iain Duncan-Smith from ex-military Thatcherite to quiet champion of the plight of the poor to the apparent ideological offspring of Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead<sup>2</sup> can be read in various ways, ranging from the impressionable character of a sheltered politician to the economic and social contexts of the time that each mutation took place. However, a focus just on the quiet man does not provide us with an adequate understanding of the institutional arrangements that have led to such a dramatic assault on the British welfare state. This paper thus provides an account of those arrangements; specifically, the wilful *institutional ignorance* surrounding a high-profile and deeply contentious policy issue: welfare reform. To do so I make use of the notion of “agnotology”, a term coined by Robert Proctor to capture and

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Murray, a political scientist currently employed by a neoconservative think-tank (the *American Enterprise Institute*), is widely regarded as the principal ‘scholarly’ voice amongst advocates of cutting welfare spending to stem the growth of an “underclass”. Lawrence Mead, Professor of Politics and Public Policy at New York University, was a very influential scholarly voice behind 1990s welfare-to-work legislation in the United States, arguing that paid employment is an ‘obligation of citizenship’.

expose the *cultural production of ignorance* surrounding issues of major public concern. Proctor analysed the ways in which the tobacco industry conspired to manufacture doubt about the cancer risks of tobacco use. Under the banner of scientific advances, the industry produced research about everything *except* tobacco hazards to exploit public uncertainty, and tried to give the impression that the hazards of cigarette smoking were still an open question when the scientific evidence was indisputable: “The tobacco industry is famous for having seen itself as a manufacturer of two different products: tobacco and doubt.” (1995: 101)

Proctor’s analyses have opened up a line of inquiry that has yet to escape from the disciplinary claws of science and technology studies and permeate social science, where the relationship between evidence and policy is always contentious and sometimes tortured. Proctor argued that we need to understand

“how ignorance is produced or maintained in diverse settings, through (for example) media neglect, corporate or governmental secrecy and suppression, document destruction, and myriad forms of inherent or avoidable culturopolitical selectivity, inattention, and forgetfulness. The point is to develop a taxonomy of understandings and uses of ignorance, but also tools for understanding how and why diverse forms of knowledge do not or did not ‘come to be’ or are delayed or neglected at different points in history.”<sup>3</sup>

This article attempts to develop such tools in respect of welfare reform in Britain, and is particularly concerned with the ways in which emotive terms, phrases and concepts have been strategically deployed by a conservative think tank (the Centre for Social Justice) to manufacture doubt with respect to the causes of unemployment and poverty, and to give the impression that ‘welfare’ is a lifestyle choice made by dysfunctional families despite the fact that considerable social scientific evidence shatters that impression. That same think tank has also directed political and public attention away from viable alternatives to punitive welfare reforms, where the evidence in pursuit of social justice is far more convincing than that provided by the Coalition in their attempts to justify paternalist policies work and welfare in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain.

## **The Centre for Social Justice and “Broken Britain”**

“We did all our stuff publicly, in the public domain. We published, we sent the stuff out, had it raised in Parliament. ...If you do it in public over weeks, people are prepared for it – journalists and whatever. By the time the minister gets around to the idea, it’s already familiar. He’s won part of the battle of public acceptance....” (Senior conservative think tank officer quoted in Peck and Tickell, 2007: 42)

In a pugnacious analysis of the role of intellectuals in shaping the process of neoliberalisation, Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2007) pay specific attention to the critical importance of think tanks in the mobilization of state power vis-à-vis the extension of market rule. In particular they focus on the free-market think tanks during the era of Margaret Thatcher, which played a decisive role in “translating foundational ideas into circulating policy knowledges, fit for governmental practice.” (p.36) Where

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPST/AgnologyConference.html>

previous governments had relied almost exclusively on senior civil servants to produce policy briefs, Thatcher wanted to create a 'market' for ideas within the policy process. This provided an impetus for think tanks such as the *Adam Smith Institute*, the *Institute for Economic Affairs*, and the *Centre for Policy Studies* to produce a plethora of widely disseminated policy packages that distilled the central tenets of (inter alia) Smith, Hayek, and Friedman into accessible sound bites for ministers and the electorate:

"[T]he various products of the think tanks – pamphlets, reports, policy briefs, occasionally books – were purposely circulated through the public sphere in order to generate conversation across different segments of the policy community and in the press." (p.41)

Loic Wacquant (2009a) provides an elaborate account of such a 'conversation' with respect to the 1990s diffusion - from the neoconservative pro-market think-tanks of Washington DC to their "trading posts" (think tanks and policy institutes) in European cities (particularly London) - of a triple-whammy of welfare cutback proposals, paternalist 'workfare' programs, and 'zero tolerance' policing methods. He describes how the "mental colonization of British policy makers by the United States" was facilitated by the media and think tank sponsorship of visits to the UK by neoconservative figureheads (Charles Murray, Lawrence Mead, William Bratton). This was quickly followed by a torrent of widely-disseminated publications:

"It is through the agency of exchanges, interventions, and publications of an academic character, real or simulated, that intellectual 'smugglers' (*passeurs*) reformulate these categories in a sort of *politological pidgin*, sufficiently concrete to 'hook' state decision-makers and journalists anxious to 'stick close to reality' ...but sufficiently abstract to strip them of any overly flagrant idiosyncrasy that would tie them back to their originating national context. And so these notions become semantic commonplaces where convene all those who, across the boundaries of occupation, organization, nationality, and even political affiliation, spontaneously think advanced neoliberal society as it wishes to be thought." (Wacquant, 2009a: 47-8)

Powerful and convincing as it is, Wacquant's analysis blends rather different UK governments into the same explanatory account. Whilst undoubtedly neoliberal in both rhyme and reason, and sporting prominent politicians (e.g. Frank Field, Jack Straw) enamoured with the prophets of punitive governance, the New Labour government operated in a quite different way with respect to think-tanks as the preceding Thatcher and John Major governments. In contrast to the 'fait accompli' approach of the Conservatives, the New Labour years (1997-2010) were marked by a pragmatist 'What Works?' approach to public policy, where centrist think tanks came to dominate all government research activities, and, subsequently, the policy process. The *Institute for Public Policy Research* and *Demos*, to take the two most Blairite examples, left market-rule unquestioned whilst they commissioned grant-hungry academics to trawl through the 'evidence base' for examples of policies that might soften the sharp edges of supply-side, inflation-busting economic management, and as they conducted focus groups with randomly selected pundits from all walks of life to evaluate policy packages on the table:

"The image of the free-market think tanks as motorcycle outriders during the buccaneering 1980s, *stretching the vocabulary of the politically feasible*, progressively gave way to the cautious second-guessing, focus-grouping, market-testing and post hoc rationalization of incrementalist policies from the Blairite think tanks...*explicating the terms of the politically deliverable*." (Peck and Tickell, 2007: 48)

At precisely the time the Blairite think tanks were at their influential apex in respect of the debate on the entire civic fabric of British society, a new think tank was born that was to change that debate completely, with dramatic implications for the British welfare state. That it initially went about this quietly should come as little surprise.

Following his resignation as leader of the Conservative Party, Duncan-Smith rejected the backbench anonymity that awaited him in favour of devoting all his time towards addressing what he had seen during his brief visit to Glasgow. In 2004, in an effort to get the apparently 'modernising' Party to engage with 'social justice' and enter the electorally significant *terra incognita* of poverty and welfare (for which Tories had a deservedly terrible reputation), Duncan-Smith established an 'independent', not-for-profit think-tank, the *Centre for Social Justice* (CSJ) "to seek effective solutions to the poverty that blights parts of Britain." The mission statement of the CSJ was, and remains:

"To put social justice at the heart of British politics and to build an alliance of poverty fighting organisations in order to see a reversal of social breakdown in the UK."<sup>4</sup>

These "poverty fighting organisations" have no place for the legion of state agencies offering public service delivery: they are described as "profoundly differing and unique small voluntary organisations and charities...[that] provide welfare in the most broken parts of British society." Even a very brief visit to the CSJ website will leave a visitor bombarded by two words: "breakdown" and "broken". As we shall see, these words became critically important to David Cameron's speeches and campaigning - and now his government's policies.

The first of many CSJ publications was written by Duncan-Smith himself, entitled *Britain's Conservative Majority* (Duncan-Smith, 2004). Based on an 'opinion poll' conducted by 'YouGov' (neither sampling strategy nor sample size revealed), he argues that Britain is at heart a conservative nation, but one committed to social justice: "The marriage of socially conservative views with a commitment to social justice is, perhaps, the most intellectually interesting characteristic of Britain's conservative majority." (p.15) Aside from this ambiguous and dubious assertion, particularly striking in this document is that Duncan-Smith never says what he means by "social justice". In fact, no definition appears on the CSJ website, or in any of its publications since 2004<sup>5</sup>. Only in a 2010 interview in the *New Statesman* does Duncan-Smith attempt to define it: "I mean to improve the quality of people's lives, which gives people the opportunity to improve their lives. In other words, so people's quality of life is improved." (quoted in Derbyshire, 2010).

Social justice has never been straightforward to define or conceptualise (D.M.Smith, 1994; Barry, 2004). Most scholars of political and moral philosophy tend to concur that

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageRef=44>

<sup>5</sup> "Social justice", of course, has never been part of Conservative intellectual history. Conservatives are most concerned with avoiding social breakdown, not achieving an abstraction like "justice", and this has always underpinned their view of the welfare state. Conservative politicians, historically, only take an interest in poverty/inequality only in so far as it assists social cohesion to do so, and doesn't ferment revolt where the wealthy are required to relinquish their property rights.



in the context of the distribution of any society's benefits and burdens, *redistribution* in the context of *inequality*, or "the defensibility of unequal relations between people" (Barry, 1989, p.3) must lie at the core of any understanding of social justice. In the same *New Statesman* interview, Duncan-Smith's response to redistributive notions of justice was as follows:

"The tax system is redistributive. We're not challenging that. Our question is to what degree redistribution through government actually works." (quoted in Derbyshire, 2010)

It would be erroneous, however, to interpret this remark as a pragmatist 'what works?' approach influenced by New Labour, particularly as David Cameron, by the 2009 Conservative Party conference, had already made up his mind on that last question:

"Labour say that to solve the country's problems, we need more government. Don't they see? It is more government that got us into this mess. Why is our economy broken? ...[B]ecause government got too big, spent too much and doubled the national debt. Why is our society broken? Because government got too big, did too much and undermined responsibility. Why are our politics broken? Because government got too big, promised too much and pretended it had all the answers. Do you know the worst thing about their big government? ....It is the steady erosion of responsibility."

Cameron's declamatory argument is clear and unequivocal: "big government" has "broken" Britain, and encouraged everyone to be "irresponsible". "Broken Britain" in fact became the catchphrase of the 2010 general election, which many attributed to the Rupert Murdoch-owned tabloids. Whilst there is no question that Tory-boosting tabloids (and broadsheets) did indeed devote considerable ink to this moral panic, its origins lie in the activities and publications of Duncan-Smith's CSJ.

In 2006 the CSJ produced a voluminous document entitled *Breakdown Britain*, the end-product of Duncan-Smith being invited by Cameron "to consider how an incoming Conservative Government could tackle Britain's most acute social problems." (p.13) Duncan-Smith convened five working groups to report back on five "pathways to poverty": "family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependence, indebtedness and addiction," for "if the drivers of poverty are not addressed an ever-growing underclass will be created" (ibid.) Throughout the document considerable attention was given to "family breakdown" in particular, and it is in the chapter on this moral minefield where all the hallmarks of conservative think tank motives and methods can be found. The central tenets of the infamous 'underclass' thesis lie in the definition of familial strife:

"We have adopted an inclusive use of the term 'family breakdown' which can be summed up in three key words: dissolution, dysfunction, and 'dad-lessness'." (p.29)

In his account of US think tank intellectual practices in the wake of the 1970s fiscal crisis of New York City and of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, where the "new urban right....notched up some significant victories in the war of ideas," Jamie Peck (2006) notes how conservative intellectuals "portray themselves as *lonely voices of reason*, as principled outsiders in a corrupt, distracted, and wrongheaded world" (p.682, emphasis

added). This captures precisely the tenor of the *Breakdown Britain* report, especially on “family breakdown”:

“The policy-making community (which includes politicians, policy-makers and academics) has been markedly reluctant to grasp the nettle of family breakdown by being clear about the benefits of marriage and committed relationships, and the merits of supporting and encouraging them. ....[T]his issue cannot be left undebated when its associated costs, across so many measures, are so high. Personal difficulties in sustaining committed relationships or close proximity to family breakdown in the lives of family, friends and colleagues, have, we feel, clouded policy considerations for too long. For this reason we urge readers of this report to lay to one side their own experience and consider the evidence-based case we make for meeting the challenge that is family breakdown.” (p.29-30)

Amidst the CSJ’s self-styled existence as both paragon and guardian of public morality lies its adoption of a New Labour buzzword: “evidence-based”. The CSJ message is clear: the objective “evidence” trumps any subjective/personal experience. Therefore “family breakdown” resulting in poverty must be true, and decisions must be made on the basis of that evidence. But when consulting the methodological appendices to the report, which detail some of the survey questions asked of a “representative sample” of 2166 people, the evidence was never going to show anything different with respect to the supposed causes and prevention of “family breakdown”:

“Which of the following would most help prevent family breakdown and its associated problems?”

- a) A return to traditional moral values in society
- b) Government should use the tax system to support married couples
- c) More awareness of the effects of family breakdown on children.

Source: p.95 of Breakdown Britain report

This rigged survey is a pure exemplar of what I have elsewhere called “decision-based evidence making” (Slater, 2008: 219). Politicians rarely consult published social science research unless it supports the policies they want to pursue (witness, for instance, the fact that *not a single social scientist* was a member of any of the CSJ working groups studying the five “pathways to poverty”). Instead, they either commission surveys that measure little more than the worldview of the institute that commissions them, or they undertake ‘research’ that tells them exactly what they want to hear, where policy ‘researchers’ set out to resolve false problems even though they have already been “implicitly settled in the way research questions are formulated” (Wacquant, 2009a: 48).

In a series of papers, Gerry Mooney and colleagues (Mooney, 2009; Mooney and Neal, 2010; Mooney and Hancock, 2010; Gray and Mooney, 2011) have provided an especially insightful interrogation of ‘Broken Britain’ rhetoric, from its roots in stigmatised eastern Glasgow, to its local and national electoral significance, and now to its contemporary

public policy undercurrent, where the “idea that family life in Britain is increasingly dysfunctional provides the ground for a renewed familialism”:

“In the hands of the Conservative Party....there is a clear argument that the broken society has its roots in ‘broken families’. Teenage pregnancies and increasing numbers of one-parent households caught, of course, in a ‘dependency culture’, feature prominently in this account. The institution of the family and approaches to families become a key site for political and policy argument and a target for policy formation. ...[M]arriage and a stable two-parent family life are key to mending Broken Britain and thereby reducing levels of poverty.” (Mooney and Neal, 2010: 145)

The renewed familialism has more than a few echoes of Charles Murray’s think tank-sponsored (1984) insistence that such a ‘dependency culture’ is not caused by economic forces, unemployment or poor educational attainment, but by “illegitimacy”: out-of-wedlock births among the “underclass”, who lack sound male role-models (“dadlessness”) and are therefore destined for a life of benefit cheating, addiction and crime. Mooney (2009) provides a revealing critical discourse analysis in respect of the media reporting of the July 2008 Glasgow East by-election, which in its stigmatisation of an entire set of neighbourhoods as a “broken society”, represents something of a watershed in terms of the debate on welfare issues in the UK. Stigmatising ideologies contained within the media reporting

“continue to plague discussions of poverty and disadvantage. Ideas of welfare ‘dependency’, of personal and area ‘dysfunctionality’ and of ‘the poor’ as some kind of ‘underclass’ continue to shape social welfare policies in the UK today. Many of us have been over such ground before – but it would seem that we have to travel this road once more.” (Mooney, 2009: 448)

David Cameron provided probably the most glaring example of ‘underclass’ reasoning when he told his Party in 2009 that “you can’t expect families to behave responsibly when the welfare system works in the opposite direction.” But Mooney is quick to point out that it is not just the Conservatives who have gone down the *familiar familial* route with respect to anti-poverty policies. Although their rhetoric was not as overtly damning of welfare claimants, both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown - informed by think tanks and welfare tsars such as Frank Field - made the distinction between ‘hard-working families’ and “others which are clearly not seen as such” (Mooney and Neal, 2010: 145). This distinction was always visible in the ‘roll-out’ neoliberalisation of welfare that took place in the New Labour years. Brief discussion of this is helpful in establishing the context for the punitive sanctions now being applied to welfare claimants under the Coalition government.

## **‘Conditionality’, Sanctions, and Benefit Reforms**

“We’re going to make it clear: If you really cannot work, we’ll look after you. But if you can work, you should work and not live off the hard work of others. ...[I]f we rebuild responsibility, then we can put Britain back on her feet.”

David Cameron, Speech to the 2009 Conservative Party conference.

When he took over as Labour leader in 1994, Tony Blair famously instructed his senior advisors to “think the unthinkable” with respect to many aspects of social policy, but particularly with respect to welfare reform<sup>6</sup>. A clear move towards a workfarist model was occurring among Labour’s policy elites well before 1997, as exemplified by the central involvement of maverick Labour MP Frank Field in promoting paternalist workfare theories imported from the United States (Wacquant 2009a). Once in office, Blair did nothing to alter the language or implications of the outgoing Conservative government’s welfare *coup de grace*: the instigation of the semantic battering ram of ‘jobseekers allowance’ in place of ‘unemployment benefit’. On the contrary: his government(s) actively endorsed welfare-to-work ideology via a “New Deal” program for those ‘jobseekers’. Direct references to ‘workfare’ were avoided in favour of rhetorical devices such as ‘equality of opportunity’ eradicating ‘dependency’; workfarist policies were presented as ‘options’ where ‘client groups’ could ‘rationally choose’ what they felt was best for them, even if to “stay at home on full benefit”, to use the words of Gordon Brown, was not an option (quoted in Peck, 2001: 302). Just as in the United States, removing ‘clients’ from the welfare rolls and funnelling them into an expanding labour market was seen as convincing evidence of success for New Labour’s employment programs, even if the swelling ranks of the working poor and what the UK Census calls the ‘economically inactive’ were conveniently ignored.

Conditionality – the principle that entitlement to welfare benefits should be dependent on satisfying certain compulsory conditions – has been creeping steadily into employment policy in Britain since the Thatcher era. The active endorsement of welfare-to-work ideology by both Blair and Brown moved conditionality to centre-stage in welfare debates. In 2001, Peck presciently remarked that:

“While the Blair revolution is firmly entrenched in both the Labour party and in government itself, oppositional forces are likely to grow in strength over time. Opposition to the principle of compulsion remains strong in the trade-union movement, among advocacy groups, in local authorities, among voluntary-sector providers, and not least among the unemployed themselves.” (p.331)

Such opposition to conditionality and compulsion did indeed strengthen, and was partially successful in blocking the more coercive and punitive elements of workfare that are characteristic of some programs in certain states and cities in America. It was this success combined with the growth in numbers of benefit claimants (particularly those claiming Incapacity Benefit) at the dawn of a major (current) recession that led Gordon Brown’s Work and Pensions Secretary, James Purnell, to ask the economist Paul Gregg<sup>7</sup> to conduct a review of conditionality in the benefits system in 2008. Gregg’s (2008) report, packaged under the New Labour-esque title of *Realising Potential*, recommended a new regime of “personalised conditionality” where the “over-arching objective is to influence the behaviour of as many working age benefit recipients as possible in order to

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<sup>6</sup> There is no space here for an elaborate account of the changes (and of their crucial Conservative precursors) that took place during the New Labour years (see Peck, 2001, for such an account).

<sup>7</sup> Gregg is by no means the prototype neoliberal apologist. He was in fact the architect of tax credits under Gordon Brown’s chancellorship and these arguably did more than any other intervention to reduce poverty from 1997-2010. However, the *Realising Potential* report is without question a ‘soft’ version of USA welfare-to-work, couched in a rather obnoxious paternalist moralism.

*move them into work*, avoid long-term benefit receipt and protect the taxpayer.” (p.10, emphasis added). Gregg recommended that everyone claiming benefits and not in work should:

- Be required to engage in activity that will help them to move towards, and then into employment;
- Have an adviser with whom they will be able to plan and agree a route back to work;
- Be obliged to act on the steps that they agree will help them;
- Have a clear understanding of the expectations placed upon them (and why) and what the consequences are for failing to meet these; and
- Be able to access a wider range of personalised support on the basis of need not what benefit they are on. (p.7)

Although some power and concern is arguably given to the claimant, the message and behavioural ethos of the report is undoubtedly in accord with the “tough love” that typified New Labour social policy<sup>8</sup>. Although we now know that Gregg was writing for a government on the way out, it is necessary to mention his report in this discussion for two reasons: to show the already rather punitive context that was in place before the current Coalition government took office, and to show the lack of any clear alternative in respect of welfare policy in Britain.

In November 2010, amidst much media fanfare, Iain Duncan-Smith (2010) delivered his White Paper on welfare reform entitled *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works*. Point 1 of the Executive Summary reveals the intention:

“The Coalition Government is determined to reform the benefit system to make it fairer, more affordable and better able to tackle poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency. ...[W]e made the commitment to overhaul the benefit system to promote work and personal responsibility.” (p.2)

Much of the media attention was devoted to three aspects of the White Paper. First, attention was paid to Duncan-Smith’s attempt to “radically simplify” what most agree to be a very complex welfare system, with a new “integrated working-age credit”<sup>9</sup> providing a basic allowance paid monthly (as opposed to fortnightly, overtly designed to encourage more “personal responsibility in household budgeting”). Second, to Duncan-Smith’s promise to create a strong incentive to “make work pay”, i.e. when people take a job, they will receive more income than if they were to remain on welfare benefits. This is to be achieved via higher ‘taper rate’, the rate at which a benefit is reduced to take account of earnings, so that for every £1 a claimant earns over the threshold, they will lose 65p instead of the current 70p (immediately raising the question of whether 5p is much of an incentive). Third, and crucially, attention was given to the chapter of the report entitled “Conditionality and Sanctions”, where the previous (Labour) government was condemned for being so lax with respect to the growing number of people on the welfare rolls, and in not cracking down on benefit fraud: “the welfare state has become a vast, sprawling bureaucracy that maintains, rather than challenges, poverty” (p.11)

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, such is the abysmal record of income inequality in Britain from 1997-2010 that those years are most accurately read as a continuation of Thatcherism (Dorling, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> This integrated (universal) credit replaces all of the following schemes: Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, Jobseeker’s Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance.

The White Paper remedy for this imagined problem was not the *withdrawal* of the state (as one might expect given the Conservative contempt for ‘big government’), but rather the *expansion* of the punitive elements of the state in respect of those living at the bottom of the class structure. This is precisely the observation of Loic Wacquant (2009b) in *Punishing the Poor*, his account of the paternalist and interventionist neoliberal state management of the social turbulence created by three decades of economic deregulation and the fragmentation of wage labour. Table 1 is taken from the White Paper (p.30) and documents the most severe welfare sanctions ever proposed by a British government.

The White Paper exhibits a striking shift away from a European welfare system towards an American-style system that comes down exceptionally hard on those who do not comply. This was to be expected, given that the CSJ working group on “Economic Dependency” “went to the United States to talk to the architects of American welfare reform” (Duncan-Smith, 2007, p.3), and that Lawrence Mead<sup>10</sup> was invited to Downing Street to advise the new government on work policies immediately after it was formed in May 2010. Duncan-Smith even adopted an American saying when interviewed about the sanctions: “The message will go across: *play ball or it’s going to be difficult*. ...We need to get this group and bring them into mainstream society” (quoted in Porter and Riddell, 2010). No mention is made of the tough economic climate in the White Paper, on the entrenched problem of low job availability, the difficulties of job creation during a recession, or of the fact that the Coalition government slashed *£11 billion* from the benefits budget before the White Paper was published. Instead, there is the

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<sup>10</sup> Mead’s view of welfare claimants is that “the government must persuade them to *blame* themselves” (1986: 10) by making benefits as unattractive as possible.

**Figure 8 Proposed future sanctions structure under the existing benefit system**

To note that in all circumstances sanctions will not apply where there is good cause

| Conditionality   | Failure  | Sanction   |   |  |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| <b>Low</b><br>Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance Work Related Activity Group                         | Includes failure to:<br>• Attend an appointment<br>• Carry out a jobseekers direction<br>• Attend employment-related programme<br>• Attend a Work Focused Interview (Employment and Support Allowance)<br>• Carry out work related activity (Employment and Support Allowance) | 100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance/Employment and Support Allowance open ended until re-engagement then fixed minimum period (1, 2 then 4 weeks)<br><br>Advisers will retain the ability not to impose a sanction for first and subsequent failures where good cause applies |   |  |
| <b>Medium</b><br>Jobseeker's Allowance only  | Failure to:<br>• Actively seek work*<br>• Be available for work*   | 1st failure:<br>100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 4 weeks   | 2nd failure:<br>100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 3 months |  |
| <b>High</b><br>Jobseeker's Allowance only  | Failure to:<br>• Apply for a job<br>• Accept job offer<br>• Take part in Mandatory Work Activity   | 1st failure:<br>100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 3 months  | 2nd failure:<br>100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 6 months | 3rd failure:<br>100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 3 years |
| For benefit recipients only required to attend Work Focused Interviews   |  |  |   |  |
| <b>Income Support and Employment and Support Allowance lone parents with a child aged over one but below the age of five</b> | Failure to attend Work Focused Interview   | 1st failure – 20 per cent (of the over-18 lone parent personal allowance) open-ended until re-engagement<br>2nd and subsequent failures – additional 20 per cent (capped at 40 per cent total for any subsequent failures) until re-engagement                               |   |  |

\* will remain a condition of entitlement under Jobseeker's Allowance. Sanctions will follow new claim (subject to expiry period), and any loss of benefit at the point of disqualification will count towards the fixed sanction period.

remarkable claim that the proposals “could lift as many as 350,000 children and 500,000 working-age adults out of poverty” (Duncan-Smith, 2010: 52) along with the following facts hidden amidst claims of “fairness” and systemic simplification:

- People who are disabled will be forced to attend “work preparation” programmes and then expected to find work.
- Lone parents with children under five will be expected to attend “keeping in touch” interviews and show that they are preparing themselves to work.
- Those who are fit to work and currently on Jobseekers Allowance will be forced to accept any job going. If there are no jobs they will be forced onto a “Mandatory Work Activity” programme – effectively forced to do unpaid “voluntary” work in return for benefits.

Commenting on the White Paper, Duncan-Smith's Glasgow friend, Bob Holman (2010), was shocked by what he saw:

"My guess is that, in order to reach his costly goal of a universal credit scheme, he has had to mollify the chancellor, George Osborne – and that can only be done by being like those Tories who take pleasure in punishing the poor."

The response from the Labour opposition, however, was disappointing – instead of highlight the devil in the detail and offer an indictment of the punitive elements of the proposals, Duncan-Smith's opposite number, Douglas Alexander, was very sympathetic: "If we can have a simpler benefits system that removes disincentives for people to get into work, we will support them. Our real concern is this: without work these changes won't work." (quoted in Wintour et al, 2010). In 2001, Peck noted the emergence of a cross-party "radical consensus" (p.274-292) with respect to tearing up the Beveridge welfare state in favour of a new workfarist outlook. In 2011, that consensus has solidified around the notion of a work-shy population choosing a "life on benefits", apart from "mainstream society", in a welfare-dependent 'Broken Britain'. As Colin Leys (1990) once wrote, "for an ideology to be hegemonic, it is not necessary that it be loved. It is merely necessary that it have no serious rival." (p.127)

## **An Agnotology of Welfare Reform**

Ever since welfare-to-work programmes became 'common sense' among think-tank researchers, journalists, policy elites, and politicians (who, together, have successfully convinced the electorate that their taxes are being used to allow the 'underclass' to stay at home watching daytime television with their illegitimate offspring instead of work), a substantial interdisciplinary empirical and theoretical literature has emerged that offers *irrefutable* evidence that paternalist welfare reforms involving coercion, compulsion, and sanctions do not lift people out of poverty, but rather remove them from welfare rolls, expand dramatically the contingent of the working and non-working poor, and affect their daily existence negatively in almost every way imaginable, aggravating extant class, racial and gender fractures in society (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2001; Newman, 1999; Peck, 2001; Standing, 2002; Wyly, 2001; Midgley, 2001; Waddan, 2003; Karger, 2003; Trudeau and Cope, 2003; Wacquant, 2009b). With respect to conditionality, welfare economist Wim van Oorschot (2000, 2006) has assessed the alleged benefits against the burdens in exhaustive detail and finds no evidence to say that 'sharp' incentives have a positive effect amongst those in receipt of welfare. Furthermore, he reports that sanctions actually serve to *disrupt* any search for meaningful activity, and *intensify* any adverse attitudes to employment. Furthermore, there is no evidence that vast numbers of people are suffering from a habit of "worklessness". It almost goes without saying that many of those not in employment work very hard: to care for frail relatives or children, or deal with episodic disabilities. To quote Guy Standing (2010), "building social policy on the basis of a tiny minority being 'scroungers' or 'lazy' is expensive illiberal folly."



The existence of this evidence-base (if we must use such a term) raises the critically important question of *how* successive governments, especially the current UK Coalition, deliberately set aside the evidence that calls into question their proposals for reform, and places those reforms in a different light (in this case: dubious, flawed and damaging). Critical social scientists working in the style of institutional political economy would usually approach such a question about evidence/policy within the analytical register of a ‘politics of knowledge production’, focusing on the circulation of policy knowledges and discourses (‘policy mobilities’) in the neoliberalised context of a marked acceleration in ‘policy transfer’ (e.g. Ward, 2006; McCann 2007). There have been considerable analytical and political advances along these lines, and I have no wish to offer a critique of such scholarship, much of which is of inestimable value. But as the White Paper discussed above has morphed into a welfare reform bill currently working its way through Parliament, it seems prudent to expose and scrutinise the *institutional ignorance* that lies at its core; an ignorance that is not one of blissful unawareness or of innocent absence of knowledge, but rather one of rational calculation. This can be achieved not from the starting point of a politics of knowledge production, but rather from what Robert Proctor (1995) calls an *agnotology*, defined as *the cultural production of ignorance*. The etymological derivation is the Greek word, *agnōsis*, meaning “not knowing”, which Paul Gilroy (2009) draws upon to argue the following:

“We need a better understanding of the relationship between information and power... a new corrective disciplinary perspective that interprets the power that arises from the command of *not knowing*, from the management of forms of ignorance that have been *strategically created and deployed, and institutionally amplified*.”

As Londa Schiebinger (2004) has explained, agnotology

“serves as a counterweight to more traditional concerns for epistemology, refocusing questions about ‘how we know’ to include questions about what we do not know, and why not. Ignorance is often not merely the absence of knowledge but an outcome of cultural and political struggle.” (p.233)

This is an apt analytical framework to interpret the workings and influence of the CSJ with respect to welfare reform, particularly as that think tank makes claims of “rigorous research by a dedicated Secretariat” that “travelled the length and breadth of the country to speak to as many people as possible.” Duncan-Smith (2007) offered these reflections from his own travels:

“I was shown....what happens when family life breaks down and when the only male role model for a boy is the drug dealer or the gang leader. Too many of our children are growing up in sad communities where failed education is hereditary and worklessness is a way of life. ...[W]hether you are a single parent or a married couple, the only real way out of poverty for your family is work. As the fabric of society crumbles at the margins what has been left behind is an underclass, where life is characterised by dependency, addiction, debt and family breakdown. ...[T]he inner city wasn’t a place; it was a state of mind - there is a mentality of entrapment, where aspiration and hope are for other people, who live in another place.” (p.4-5)

Tempting though it is to read this “broken society” narrative as the indignant reflections of a sheltered millionaire politician who has suddenly found a moral conscience on his road to Damascus, such a reading would miss the mark politically and analytically. Viewed through an agnotological lens, the CSJ publications recast the public debate on

poverty, welfare and unemployment in three ways. First, they divert attention away from the structural and institutional failures that lie behind poverty (and from the nature and extent of inequality in Britain). Second, they manufacture public doubt with respect to those causal factors ('not knowing'). Third, they ignore any alternative approaches to the problem of poverty (and welfare) in Britain.

On the question of alternatives, it is instructive to consider what is never considered or mentioned in any of the CSJ publications (all of which boast intellectual rigour and comprehensiveness in their 'research' and purport to be "wide-ranging" and "radical" in their policy recommendations). For instance, there is no discussion of the ongoing efforts to secure 'living wages' in London and beyond (which both Tory London mayor Boris Johnson and indeed David Cameron himself applauded during the 2010 UK General Election), wages which would provide more of an incentive to work than any reduction in the taper rate or tax reward for marriage; nor is there any reflection on the momentum surrounding probably the best known and widely acknowledged global NGO on welfare reform, the *Basic Income Earth Network* (BIEN). A basic income effectively "decouples income security from the labour market" (Standing, 1993, p.57) guaranteeing unconditionally an adequate income to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement. Advocates of basic income have long challenged the assumption that bringing people back into the labour market will reduce poverty, and instead they argue for the severance of subsistence from work, and of income from paid labour<sup>11</sup>. Critics of basic income (the orthodoxy) argue that this is a "something for nothing" strategy, one that would encourage even more idleness and dependency among the poor. But as one of the founders of the BIEN has argued, "conventional policies also give something for nothing...mega-bailouts [of 2008-9] were given largely to sectors and firms that had actually done harm." (Standing, 2011, p.19) He continues:

"we are told that people want to work and are 'happy' when in jobs. If so, giving everybody basic security should at most induce only a tiny minority to be less hardworking than otherwise." (ibid.)

If we are indeed living at a time of state-induced social *insecurity* (Wacquant, 2009b), it would seem that basic income *security* is the logical remedy (and indeed could provide the crucial stability to create the 'incentive' to work that the CSJ argues is so lacking in a 'broken' society).

The strategic deployment of ignorance is best exemplified by the CSJ's insistence not on job availability or economic malaise but on *family breakdown* as the principal root of all poverty in Britain:

"If there were less family breakdown and lone parenthood, there would be fewer children taken into care, less homelessness, less drug addiction, less crime, less demand on the health services, less need for remedial teaching in schools, better average educational performance and less unemployment. *All of these would save the taxpayer money and some would contribute to better economic performance in the country as a whole.*" (Duncan-Smith, 2006, p.33)

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<sup>11</sup> Loic Wacquant (2008, p252-6) argues that basic income is the "revolution in public policy" that is needed to stem the rise of advanced marginality on both sides of the Atlantic.

Correspondingly, it seems as if there is no social problem for which promoting marriage is not the answer. A brief visit to the CSJ website finds the think tank desperate to guard against any views to the contrary; for example, when the distinguished welfare historian Pat Thane (2010) authored a British Academy-sponsored pamphlet arguing that the CSJ present a misleading and empirically inaccurate portrait of a British past filled with “happy families”, the CSJ responded quickly with a 24-page rebuttal written by two legal scholars (Probert and Callan, 2010) purporting to offer “robust evidence” that “a child growing up in a fractured, chaotic or fatherless family is far less likely to develop the pro-social skills essential for success later in life.” (p.4) Over two decades ago, Charles Murray (1990, p.41) visited London and recommended to policy elites, journalists and think tank officials that the “civilising force of marriage” be the treatment for the “spreading disease” of an “underclass” of single mothers (for whom “sex is fun and [having] babies is endearing”) and absent fathers (“essentially barbarians”) (see Wacquant, 2009a, p.7-54 for an elaborate account of Murray’s visits to the UK). Today, the fact that *marriage is the official anti-poverty policy recommendation* of the CSJ to the Conservative Party speaks volumes about the truncation and distortion of political understanding in respect of the ongoing articulation of poverty, social class and space in British society.

## Deflecting the Reality of a Broken State

In 1966, the literary critic Kenneth Burke provided us with the concept of the *terministic screen*<sup>12</sup> to illustrate the remarkable power of language, particularly how certain terms “direct the attention into some channels rather than others”:

“Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality.” (p.45)

In developing this concept, Burke discussed some photographs he once saw:

“They were different photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they were made with different colour filters. Here something so ‘factual’ as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, even in form, depending upon which colour filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded.” (ibid.)

It is instructive to consider this conceptualisation in the context of the activities and publications of the CSJ, and in particular their profound influence on current government policy. Amidst the CSJ hullabaloo surrounding “family breakdown”, Duncan-Smith convened a sixth working group to “explore how the third sector might be supported to do more to assist vulnerable people escape poverty.” It called this third sector the “Welfare Society”, which David Cameron later dubbed the “Big Society”, something

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<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Loic Wacquant for introducing me to this fascinating concept. In France and elsewhere in Europe, he (2006) shows there are three terministic screens to hide mounting inequality/marginality: the spatial (it’s a problem of neighbourhoods, housing, segregation); the ethnic or cultural (it’s immigration, integration, diversity); and the criminal (it’s youth delinquency, violence, insecurity).

which the state needed to promote and support to fix the “Broken Society”. The common denominator here is the key: the hallmark of the Thatcher revolution was that society did not exist (“there is no such thing as society”), so the frequent, obsessive references to it today are a tactic designed to convince a jaded electorate that this is a “modernised”, compassionate Conservative party, prepared to learn from the mistakes of its past and reach out to the parts of Britain that other Conservatives could (and would) not reach. The “Big Society” is a desperately woolly notion (even to some members of the Conservative party), but what it masks is nothing short of a systematic demolition of the welfare state. This can be detected in the 2006 *Breakdown Britain* report:

“[I]t is hoped that the British public can be helped not just to better appreciate the centrality of combating poverty in creating a better and fairer society – but also how through increased volunteering and philanthropy they can help win this battle. With proper training, a few hours relationship counselling or providing childcare support can help keep a vulnerable family together – in circumstances where its breakdown could send the children into long-term social exclusion. A volunteer can work those hours, can stop that family breakdown, can save lives – and be proud of themselves.

...[We need to] develop innovative and effective ways of helping Britain’s most vulnerable – *in a way that a controlling state paymaster is incapable of allowing*. A philanthropist (whether a taxi-driver, a nurse, or a hedge-fund manager) can make that difference.” (Duncan-Smith, 2006, p.87-88)

At the heart of the ‘Big Society’ agenda is a deep-seated belief that the welfare state has run its course - we are now “all in this together”, as David Cameron said following the 2010 general election, and the new obligation of British citizenship is to volunteer and donate (regardless of the ability to do so) in order to help the ‘vulnerable’ (that this *redistribution through benevolence* is the policy package for a far-from-benevolent nation is never mentioned). ‘Broken Britain’ would thus appear to be an archetypal and especially cunning terministic screen: it is a *selection and deflection of reality* (bolstered by the strategic deployment of ignorance), which encourages all who encounter the screen to view society through its behavioural filters of family breakdown, out-of-wedlock childbirth, worklessness, dependency, anti-social behaviour, personal responsibility, addiction, and teenage pregnancies<sup>13</sup>.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 Wall Street bail-outs, Jamie Peck (2010) took a cue from Neil Smith’s diagnosis of neoliberalism as “dead but dominant” to argue – cautiously - that it

“may indeed have entered its zombie phase. The brain has apparently long since ceased functioning, but the limbs are still moving, and many of the defensive reflexes seem to be working too. The living dead of the free-market revolution continue to walk the earth, though with each resurrection their decidedly uncoordinated gait becomes even more erratic.” (p.109)

Just over two years later, “zombie neoliberalism” does not seem an appropriate characterisation. On the contrary, neoliberalism almost seems to have doubled down and come back with more force, more deliberate agency, more ruthlessness and, in particular,

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<sup>13</sup> One might reasonably assume that ‘Broken Britain’ refers to Britain’s financial sector and its entire regulatory apparatus, but it speaks volumes about the state of public debate on poverty in Britain that it refers to poor people and poor districts.

canniness. In that sense, it has not lost its head, as Peck's formulation suggests, since the zombie's arms and legs are not so much flailing wildly as *operating with piercing precision and rational calculation*, not to mention a masterful spin capacity for populist revolution (that takes brain power, ideology, cultural and clinical expertise). Right-wing think tanks in the UK such as the Centre for Social Justice and Policy Exchange continue to gain in power, and their influence is hard to avoid in any assessment of how the contemporary neoliberal state is aided and augmented. Their glossy and authoritative publications, their fast channels of access to authority and opinion-makers, their speechwriters and backroom 'researchers' have together successfully deflected attention away from the reality of the problem to be addressed: a *broken state*. As Wacquant (2009b) has articulated, cabinet ministers and leading police officers, whilst being highly authoritarian and punitive when it comes to dealing with the destructive consequences of economic deregulation for those at the lower end of the class and status spectrum, have for three decades adopted a *laissez-faire* ethos toward the causal agents of inequality at the top end: powerful corporations and the upper class (for example, media tycoons and heads of financial and banking corporations, but also at parliamentarians who stole from the public coffers with illegal reimbursements). An appropriate question to ask in the wake of the 2011 riots in English cities<sup>14</sup> is why the phrase "copycat criminal activity" that was used to 'explain' those disturbances has not been applied to the financial institutions of the square mile (and the politicians that count on donations from those institutions), and why the massive crime and commotion that triggered the 2007-8 financial collapse has still gone unpunished whilst the government reacts with diligence and virulence against street crime (and those who commit welfare fraud). David Cameron stated of the rioters: "There are pockets of our society that are not just broken, but are frankly sick." The Centre for Social Justice shaped his perspective, which makes his audience look away from the top of the class structure, where "a complete lack of responsibility in parts of our society", to use Cameron's own words, can be found.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Broken Britain' rhetoric now lies at the heart of the government's response to the riots, which will be addressed in a separate paper.

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