

The Ethic Of Respect:
A Left Wing Cause

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By Rt. Hon. Frank Field, MP

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Foreword

Throughout his adult life, Frank Field has been a passionate advocate for the poor. In the 1970s he ran Britain's leading anti-poverty campaign organisation, the Child Poverty Action Group, and was Director of the UK's Low Pay Unit. In 1979 he was elected to the House of Commons as the Labour Member for Birkenhead, a working-class constituency which includes the Merseyside docks and which contains more than its share of poverty and hardship. Since then he has established himself as Britain's leading campaigner for welfare reform (including reform of retirement pensions). For seven years he chaired the House of Commons Social Security Select Committee, and for a short while he served as Minister for Welfare Reform in the first Blair government until he resigned after clashing with the chief Treasury Minister, Gordon Brown. In 1998 he returned to the back benches, where he has remained ever since. At the 2005 UK General Election, he was one of only a handful of sitting Labour MPs to increase his majority.

Frank has always combined his practical political interventions with thoughtful and original reflections on social policy issues (the online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* describes him as 'one of the most intelligent Labour MPs' in Westminster). In recent years, the scope of his political activity and writing has expanded to encompass what he calls 'the politics of behaviour'. Shocked by reports from his constituents about the 'low level terror' to which they are being

subjected by increasingly unruly neighbours and aggressive local youths, he has come to realize that a major blight on the lives of many people living in poorer communities is the breakdown of traditional norms governing public behaviour. He points out that unlike more affluent people, the poor cannot escape anti-social neighbours by moving house, changing the schools their children attend, or using political clout to get the authorities to intervene. In the face of a rising tide of incivility, they are often powerless, and their lives are becoming increasingly miserable as a result. It is for this reason that Frank now promotes the politics of behaviour as a 'left wing cause'.

The Centre for Independent Studies invited Frank to visit Australia in 2004 to participate in our Consilium conference. So stimulating and timely was his contribution that we invited him back to Consilium in 2005 when he also delivered a public lecture in Sydney. He took as his topic for this lecture, *Respect: A Left Wing Cause*. His lecture attracted a capacity audience and drew widespread acclaim, not least from prominent left-of-centre political leaders such as the then NSW Premier Bob Carr (who introduced him) and Indigenous affairs campaigner Noel Pearson (whom Frank visited in Cape York). Frank has subsequently revised and developed the lecture he gave that evening, and we are delighted to publish the result as this CIS Occasional Paper.

Frank Field stands in a long tradition of English 'ethical socialists'¹ whose inspiration derives as much from their Christian beliefs as from political doctrine. The basic thesis in his paper is that 19th century Christianity bequeathed us a golden legacy, what he calls a 'rich deposit of ethical values', but that in England at any rate, this legacy is now being squandered.

He points out that the Christian cultural legacy persisted long after Christianity itself began to lose its grip². Even as the churches and chapels emptied from Late Victorian times onwards, the core Christian values lived on through the mutual aid institutions of the 19th and early 20th century labour movement, as well as in a 'public ideology' which he calls 'English idealism'. The persistence of core Christian values in major civic institutions (as well as in political discourse) through much of the 20th century found expression in

ideals of self-improvement, civic participation and individual virtue to which there was widespread adherence. Frank summarises these ideals as constituting an ‘ethic of respect’, and it is this which he fears is now disappearing from English culture with calamitous consequences.

His paper identifies some of the forces which he believes have eroded this ethic of respect. The decline in traditional, male, blue-collar jobs has left young men in areas like Merseyside with few prospects, engendering widespread disaffection and yobbishness. The expansion of educational opportunities has, paradoxically, enabled bright working class children to escape their origins, leaving their communities with few home-grown leaders to articulate shared values and identity. The emergence of a crass, individualistic mass culture has resulted in the celebration of boorishness and denigration of the sort of striving and sacrifice required to achieve self-improvement. The growth of long-term and widespread welfare dependency has eroded people’s belief in their own efficacy. But at the heart of the problem he locates the weakening of family life — the breakdown of marriage, the spread of single parent female-headed households where boys grow up without the steadying influence of a mature, responsible male, and the loss of parenting skills which has left increasing numbers of children unsocialised and rudderless. It is within the family, he says, that we first learn consideration for others, and as family life has collapsed, so too has civil virtue.

His essay focuses specifically on England. Publishing it in Australia prompts two key questions: first, does his diagnosis apply equally here? And secondly, what might be done to stop the rot?

In his two recent visits to Australia, Frank formed the impression that things have not deteriorated here to the same extent as in England. He commented many times on the friendliness and politeness he encountered in shops, in taxis, and simply wandering in public spaces. Believing that civility is still strong in Australia, he came to see his role here more as a warning than a wake-up call. His message, simply, is that we should not repeat England’s mistakes.

This is a comforting message — but is he right? It is exceedingly difficult to measure degrees of incivility and boorishness across different countries or over time.³ Part of the problem is that what is ‘impolite’ in one culture may simply be ‘informality’ in another. But it is also difficult to find strong and consistent empirical indicators of incivility. We might find, for example, that public drunkenness is more of a problem in England, while incidence of graffiti is more widespread in Australia. People might be more willing to give up their seats on a bus in England, but they might also be more willing to try to evade paying their fare. So while some indicators might suggest Britain is in a worse state than Australia, others may well point to the opposite conclusion. It is probably impossible to get an adequate overall measure.

Clearly Australia does not share all the same causal conditions that Frank Field believes have contributed to Britain’s current problems. The collapse of traditional urban manufacturing jobs, in particular, has no strong parallel here. But on many other of his most pertinent causal factors, the two countries do appear remarkably similar:

- Britain and Australia appear to share similar (low) levels of *religiosity*, with fewer than one in five adults in each country attending religious services on a regular basis.⁴ If religion is the mainspring of the ethic of respect, both countries have been living on a wasting asset for a long time.
- Research suggests that levels of *‘social capital’* are fairly similar in the two countries. Levels of trust in our fellow citizens are almost the same, as is the extent of people’s involvement in voluntary work.⁵ In this sense, the degree to which we relate to and are concerned about other people looks much the same here as in Britain.
- The two countries also share common recent patterns of *family change*, with substantial increases in the rate of family break-up and comparable numbers of single parent families.⁶ In both countries, more than one in five children is growing up with only one parent, and if Frank Field is right — that this is the single, biggest cause of the erosion of the ethic of respect in

Britain — then exactly the same could be expected to happen in Australia.

- Britain and Australia also share similar recent *welfare dependency trends*. In both countries, one in six adults of working age relies on income support, and both nations have witnessed very large increases in the numbers of people claiming disability benefits and single parent payments.⁷

Given these striking similarities between the two countries, it would be odd if Australia were found to be wholly immune to the malaise now afflicting Britain. And of course, it is not.

- *Crime* is probably the most obvious and direct measure of social pathology, and the patterns are comparable in the two countries. The international Crime Victim Survey covering 17 countries found England and Wales had the highest rate of crime victimization, with Australia in second place. On contact crimes, such as robbery and assault, Australia overtook England.⁸
- Another obvious measure of incivility and the breakdown of community standards of behaviour is public *drunkenness*, including so-called ‘binge drinking’ by younger people. This is now common in both countries much more so than in other developed nations.⁹

In earlier research on civility, Nicole Billante and I found considerable concern about fraying standards of public behaviour, particularly among older Australians who could compare the contemporary situation with the past. In his paper, Frank notes that if Edwardian standards of public behaviour were applied today, most of the youth of Britain would find themselves in jail. But the same could be said of Australia too, for in our research we found many examples from newspaper reports of the early 1950s showing that public behaviour which is commonplace now was deemed unacceptable then and incurred formal penalties as well as informal opprobrium.¹⁰

As I write, hundreds of police officers are grappling with hate-filled, drunken white youths bent on violent confrontation with equally aggressive young men of Middle Eastern origin on Sydney's southern beaches. The newspapers are full of articles agonizing over the loss of 'tolerance', the rise of 'racism', and the splintering of our core values by 30 years of a multicultural experiment in diversity. It is tempting to suggest that the same ugly, mean-spirited, anti-social aggressiveness that Frank Field has encountered in his Birkenhead constituency on Merseyside can now also be found on the beaches of Cronulla or Brighton-le-Sands. Some commentators even claim to have identified the same causes.¹¹

So there are certainly parallels between what Frank describes in England and what is happening in Australia. This leads then to the second question: what can we do to prevent the trend to incivility from spiralling?

Frank rightly says in his paper that we cannot reinvent popular Christianity, and he looks instead for secular equivalents that might restore a strong sense of personal responsibility and civic engagement. He thinks he may have found the answer in new school curricula (to teach young people parenting responsibilities), new civic ceremonies (such as baby-naming ceremonies to take the place once occupied by baptism), and a shift to conditional welfare (so that receipt of benefits depends on acceptable behaviour).

None of this can do any harm, and the idea of conditional welfare could certainly help rectify the damaging 'rights mentality' which seems to have infected so much modern social policy thinking.¹² But top-down institutional innovations like invented civic ceremonies and changes to the school curriculum will not easily mobilize the shift in common sentiment that would be required to resurrect a strong ethic of respect throughout our society.¹³

There is, however, one thing that central authority certainly can and should do to underpin the ethic of respect, and that is to enforce formal rules of behaviour clearly and consistently. In his paper, Frank notes that 'rules and guidelines are necessary, even for the best of us.' He says that even for those who are disposed to behave well, rules perform a crucial function, for they 'affirm that their own

instincts are good and shared by the majority of their fellow citizens. The rules act, in other words, as a reassurance to individuals as they plan out their lives.’

This insight is crucial, and it reinforces the conclusion that Nicole Billante and I reached in our Australian civility research. Most people want to behave properly, to be civil and respectful to others, but our shared norms of behaviour are repeatedly being challenged, and this generation probably feels less certain of itself than any other before it. In a situation like this, it is crucial that those charged with the duty of implementing the law do so without prevarication. When fare evaders are let off without charge, or rowdiness goes unpunished, or vandalism, lewdness, threatening behaviour, public drunkenness or even illicit drug use gets condoned (or worse still, tacitly supported through the public provision of facilities like legal injecting rooms), shared norms of behaviour inevitably grow more fragile, for ordinary members of the public begin to question whether their own instinctive ethical judgements are correct and whether they are shared by anybody else.

In his paper, Frank notes how, a century ago, the norms governing public behaviour were clear to all, and public figures like school teachers, doctors or even municipal park keepers or tram conductors felt confident about their role in expressing and enforcing them. They knew that the rest of the community (including those ‘higher up’) would back them up:

A public ideology, governing so much of public conduct, gave what would now appear to be an unimaginable degree of confidence to those whose role was initiating the young into the wider community. Those ever so important foot soldiers of any society, the clergy, teachers, police, factory and health inspectors, doctors, voluntary workers, and a growing host of other officials, went about their task with assurance. While they attended directly to the issues that gave rise to their position — teaching or policing, for example — they knew their work fitted into a much larger picture. They were committed to this wider goal of improving the type of

character they and their charges possessed. They also knew that, if push came to shove, they would be unquestionably backed by society's most influential people. There is again a lesson here for us to bear in mind when we come to consider what options are open to us.

In Australia as well as in England, this confidence has now gone. In a defining moment in Sydney in October 2005, Magistrate Pat O'Shane dismissed a case brought against a youth who had drunkenly sworn obscenities at police in a public street. Rubbing salt into the wound, she ordered the police to pay the offender's costs of \$2,600. She told her court, 'I'm not sure there is such a thing as community standards any more.'¹⁴

If we want to safeguard the ethic of respect, the first step is to get our teachers, politicians, magistrates and judges to understand how important it is for them not only to recognize that community standards of behaviour do still exist, but also to defend them with a whole-hearted commitment and tenacity. If we cannot rely on this, then we are indeed in trouble.

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The Ethic Of Respect: A Left Wing Cause

Rt. Hon. Frank Field, MP

I know very well that [this country] is not a realm of unfailing virtue and goodness. That does not alter the fact that it managed to produce a form of existence which is freer of the sins against one's neighbour than any other community has attained ... it excels in having come to terms with the fact that people in large numbers need both to be conscious of one another and leave one another alone.¹⁵

These were the words a continental refugee used to describe the Britain he had chosen to live in. They were admittedly uttered in another age, but that other age was only 1984.

In the first section of this paper I shall comment on how a particular British character was shaped, one which was instrumental in bringing about the largely self-governing community described above by Sir Geoffrey Elton. The force of Christianity, the role of working-class mutuality and the place of English Idealism all gave momentum to what I call Britain's long march to respectability.

I turn in the second section to those forces which I see as responsible for the Balkanisation of this peaceable kingdom: a vicious meltdown in skilled and semi-skilled manual jobs and with it a sharp increase in the number of broken families and the widespread loss of

parenting skills; educational reform which was beneficial to the most able of working-class children, but which left a vast majority of their peers ill-equipped to hold down those decent jobs which continued to exist; a drink and drugs culture together with a media-driven individualistic culture that thrives at the expense of a collective or public ethic. Nor must it be forgotten how we, as a country, became careless to the point of irresponsibility in assuming that the kind of character which imbued a peaceable kingdom would continue without the most careful and continuous nurturing. Into this foul mixture of decline I do not add welfare as a prime cause of our present discontent. Welfare's role is of a different nature. Welfare does not open up new wounds in the body politic. It does, however, operate in a manner which reinforces and exaggerates the weakness inflicted by the other causes discussed here.

In the third section I recall that event which convinced me that as an MP my agenda was to be centred on the politics of behaviour. I then go on to comment on what can be done to stem the apparent ever-swelling tide of yobbishness. I am not so naive as to believe that those three forces which in the past once made Britain so peaceful a society can be simply reconstructed. I do see a role, however, and this is outlined in the third section, for a new, contract culture as a means of regaining the kind of society that so attracted Sir Geoffrey Elton to Britain's shore not so many decades ago. Indeed, at the moment, I do not see any options other than embracing this approach.

My concluding remarks will centre on why establishing the culture of respect should have the highest priority for the Left. It is Labour's core constituency which has the roughest time and has fewest resources to counter this new Leviathan that most commonly stalks the poorest areas. In planning new strategies the historical divide which showed up within the ranks of radicals a century ago, between ethical reformers who see reform largely as building up from individuals and families, and the institutional reformers who insist on a top-down structural approach, is used to illustrate the way ahead. But first a prelude which sketches the nature of the peaceful kingdom we have lost.

The face of the new politics belongs to Jason. He was my first introduction to a destroyer of peace and order for whom no laws then existed to control his behaviour.

Jason, then all of 13 years of age, had been busy with his mates, pelting local residents with slates as they tried to go about their business and to the local store. Standing on the roof of a nearby deserted pub, Jason and his not-so-merry band of accomplices, pelted local shoppers. They won. The business closed and only then did the gang descend from their temporary home. Under what was then the existing law, the police were unable to do anything effective, and Jason realised this early on.

I first learned that the business was about to go under from a phone call from the owner. Her hard work in building up a viable general store, in an area which made that far from certain, was about to collapse. On the heels of that phone call the local residents came to see me at one of my surgeries at the Town Hall. It was a large group of upright citizens, some younger than me (that becomes ever more common now), some older.

The younger ones, I judged, could well look after themselves. But, as they explained, they took great care in coming to see me. To have acted otherwise would have attracted the gang's attention and a series of counter-offensives would have quickly followed. I was assured that, for the same reason, the same carefulness not to draw attention to themselves would be followed on the return journey.

The words tumbled out in a mixture of raw anger and despair. 'Who would have thought that this is how we would end up?' was a common refrain. It is just in the last few years, I was emphatically told, that it all went haywire. 'People talk of things collapsing like a pack of cards. They are dead right, except it is my life that has gone, not simply cards.'

Jason, if not already, will very shortly be an alcoholic. For all too many very young teenagers across the country, alcoholism

gives the quick buzz, and a buzz is the key determinant of what is and what is not done. Cheap, double-strength cider is sold in an increasing array of stores and off licences. One litre of this deadly mixture goes for a pound. Licensing committees have very little power to limit the number of licences. A refusal is quickly appealed and appeals are almost always successful.

Drinking amongst the gang is not a social experience. Unlike older people who learned to drink first with their parents and grandparents, and only then alone with their mates, drinking for Jason and his like is all about getting drunk as quickly as possible. As Jason is feared locally, he can buy his alcohol as and when the fancy takes him, although he is clearly under-age.

A Prelude

There is no index by which we can measure the rise and subsequent collapse of respect, or the practice of a culture of common decency. But let me present two sets of information which give the lie to those who claim that an expression of concern at the collapse of common decencies is simply the middle class indulging in one of its favourite pastimes of stirring up moral panic. From an entire set of crime data I cite the number of violent crimes against the person and then present a profile of those people in Edwardian times whose actions were deemed to be so serious a lapse from decent behaviour that they warranted imprisonment. Here are illustrations, if any are needed, of just how successful Britain's march towards respectability was in establishing a peaceful and largely self-governing society and one in which the law played only a residual role.

The level of violence against the person is an index, I believe, although an extreme one, of our endemic lack of mutual respect. Of course the different rates of reporting crime have to be considered and will without any doubt account for some of the difference in the data

presented here. Yet the extremes of these figures cannot be wished away on technical grounds alone. For, as the march of respectable society was realised, crimes of violence against the person almost became extinct. In 1900 there were only 1908 such crimes reported in the entire country. Today there are, on average, more violent crimes against individuals in each Parliamentary constituency in England and Wales than there were for the whole country a century ago. Indeed, violent crimes, though slowly rising through the past hundred years, began to escalate only in the 1960s, which adds a particularly unpleasant twist to the poet Philip Larkin's insight into what began in 1963.¹⁶ Today, sadly, such crimes have broken through the million mark barrier.

Let me now present some prison data from a little over 100 years ago. What society defines as a crime, let alone a crime which deserves a prison sentence, changes over time and reflects, to some extent, how serious the level of crime is perceived to be. Josie Harris has commented on what the Edwardians considered so serious a lapse in behaviour that it warranted imprisonment. I happily cite this evidence for those who contend that I (and others who think similarly) have simply conjured up a peaceful golden age which never existed.

In 1912-13 ... one quarter of males aged 16 to 21 who were imprisoned in the Metropolitan area of London were serving seven-day sentences for offences which included drunkenness, 'playing games in the street', riding a bicycle without lights, gambling, obscene language and sleeping rough. If late-20th century standards of policing and sentences had been applied in Edwardian Britain, the prisons would have been virtually empty; conversely, *if Edwardian standards were applied in the 1990s then most of the youth of Britain would be in jail.*¹⁷

Whatever Britain might have been like in the early 1800s, by the middle of the 19th century, the character, values and actions of the people were changing markedly. From the mid century onwards, this change was to be seen in how peaceful the country was becoming. This peacefulness was not one imposed from above by a

tyrannical state. Rather, it was the product of an English character which led to a largely self-governing commonwealth and which then itself strengthened the forces of self-government. The most common state agency encountered by ordinary families was the post office and the only visible state employee was the policeman.¹⁸ Indeed, for most working people a century ago, the post office was probably what they thought the state was. How do we account for this quite remarkable transformation?

Attack on public workers

Ray has worked as a paramedic at Birkenhead ambulance station for the best part of 20 years, which almost exactly parallels my time as the town's MP. He reports on the build-up of anti-social behaviour during that time culminating in the town's ambulance station being temporarily closed. What is extraordinary is that this closure was the result of continual wild aggression by children as young as eight or nine years.

What happened to the ambulance station in Birkenhead is not an isolated case in the town or, more importantly, in the country. A noticeable change in behaviour occurred well over a decade ago and was then simply dubbed 'bad behaviour'. The ambulance workers' cars parked around the station became targets of attack. Twelve years ago, the attacks became so sustained that the cars were moved into the station.

Then the station came under attack and defensive grills were screwed onto each of the windows. These security fences, in turn, provided access to the roof. Cars leaving the station were stoned. One ambulance worker was 'bricked' while working inside the station, and the new fuel tank came under bombardment. This slide into anarchy at the ambulance station is a parable for our time.

Given the worry of drunks dying by inhaling their own vomit, the police are naturally keen that the worst drunks should be taken to hospital or, possibly, home. If drunks are alert enough to fight, there is little chance of their aspirating their own vomit. Even so, the local police are anxious to see

younger drunks taken home by ambulance, according to paramedics. Angela, another paramedic, explained how when taking young drunks home it was not unknown, although thankfully uncommon, for a parent or grandparent to join in arguing with the ambulance staff, and sometimes fighting alongside the young drunk who becomes aggressive once again when back on home territory.

In Wirral alone there are already five households that ambulance crews will not attend without police protection. It is not a question of the crews attending unannounced or unsummoned. These are five families who are requesting the help of the ambulance service yet, despite such a request, behave in such a way, and have such a record of fighting and brawling with people who they see as carrying with them an authority, that the police have to be present to protect the ambulance staff as they take a member of the family to hospital. The mob rules even in cases of an extreme emergency and, even though a family member needs emergency treatment, attacks on staff from the families are more than a possibility.

These five families are, admittedly, extreme examples. Much more common are actions showing that what used to be taken for granted as basic, civilised behaviour is breaking down. Wirral Ambulance vehicles are regularly looted as the crews move from their vehicle into the home of a person requesting emergency help. A service which could not be more obviously run for the immediate needs of citizens is nevertheless considered, by a growing proportion of yobbos, to be fair game.

Section One: seminal forces

i) Christianity's impact

It is impossible to comprehend how British society functioned, particularly over the past 200 years, without appreciating the central importance of Christianity. Within the history of Christianity in Britain, one period of extraordinary growth was marked by what is called the evangelical revival. It is in this revival that the roots of Britain's great journey to respectability are to be found. Evangelical morality, as Noel Annan observed, 'was the single most widespread influence in Victorian England'¹⁹. It taught a simple, comprehensive public creed of what was expected of each and every one of us. Its central message was that each would be judged by their actions. Moreover, the judgments, once made, were backed up by a comprehensive set of rewards and punishments. Personal responsibility to oneself, family and neighbours, was central to this new cosmos. A new public ideology was being established which gave everyone's lives a sense of order, structure and purpose, although, of course, no one then thought of it in such terms.

It is easy to mock such ideas and with them the incessant activity such as that shown by Hanna Moore as she flooded the market with 'improving tracts'. But to do so is to opt out of any attempt to stand in the shoes of our ancestors, to try and understand who and which forces motivated them. Today's Britain is so different from the world I am describing that a journey into the past in a time machine is required if we are not only to meet our Victorian and Edwardian ancestors, but also to understand how they viewed the world. If we could, using this time machine, move back 100 years we would see that we were not only in a different country, but perhaps even in a different world.

Victorian society was one governed by The Book. Countless numbers of individuals and families lived out their lives in accordance with what they believed The Book taught them, believing that the Bible was a practical guide to their lives in a way that Muslims regard the Koran.

The literature of the late 19th century and Edwardian Britain illustrates what I mean. The village labourers, so finely detailed in Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford*, had a sense of living a religion which can be seen in much of the Muslim world today. The cosmology is almost identical. Their operating framework was to view the world through the eyes of God, an outlook that would now be foreign and incomprehensible to most British people.

Christianity in Victorian society was the great engine force shaping the human spirit and character, but the range and depth of adherence was not to be maintained. No sooner did evangelicalism sweep the country than doubt with a capital D began to take hold of a growing part of the public imagination. At the very peak of Victorian Christianity, large numbers of the population had already abandoned attending church or chapel – if indeed they had ever done so.

R H Tawney, following Matthew Arnold's imagery, compared the loss of a practising Christian adherence in Britain to that of a great ocean receding from the shores of our island. But even as the tide of active adherence turned, it left behind a rich deposit of ethical values which was quickly ploughed by a Labour movement determined to give its creed a very distinctive English DNA. These moral deposits similarly provided the most fertile ground on which to grow and nurture the public ideology of English Idealism which swept in on a new high tide of moral earnestness.

ii) Labour's Ideology

Clichéd though it is, Morgan Phillip's observation that the Labour movement owes more to Methodism than Marxism nonetheless holds a great truth. How could it be otherwise? The force of the evangelical revival did not somehow miraculously stop at the doorposts of those families who were to become the leaders and foot soldiers of what became known as the Labour movement.

Such a view has not, however, gone uncontested. The senior Labour historian E P Thompson wrote that 'the working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making'. Thompson argues that the working class of the early 19th century was the product, neither of paternalism nor of Methodism, but of a high degree of conscious self-effort.²⁰

In a glorious attempt to give pride of place to the teams of working people who had been drowned by what he described as the condescension of posterity, Thompson changed how history is written. Against the high politics of statesman and rulers, Thompson billed the forgotten voices of working people who, between 1780 and 1832, he believed, forged a shared identity and shared interest against their employers to become the English working class. But was a working class in existence to witness its own birth?

Hardly: but there was a high degree of conscious self-effort in their own making. Gradually, working people realised that if they acted collectively, they had the strength to mitigate the grosser vulgarities and cruelties of early capitalism. They also began to realise they could change the type of people they were by developing and living out in their everyday lives values that shaped and ennobled their characters. It is within these self-imposed rules, governing their personal lives as well as their friendly societies, co-operatives and trade unions, that we see most clearly the values working people were trying to develop. Here a decency culture emerged centring around respect for themselves, for their families, colleagues and neighbours.

Let me cite Thompson on the rules adopted by the membership and from which the watch words of the new society emerged. The rule books of these organisations, emphasising as they did, ‘decency and regularity’,²¹ and we might add order, ring out a clear message that here were groups of people intent on raising the general standard of behaviour. Guidelines and sanctions were also seen as crucial to a successful outcome – a lesson we need to bear in mind later when we consider how such a framework could be developed today. Behaving badly to other members—striking another, being drunk on Sundays, taking God’s name in vain—would attract a fine. So would answering back a steward or speaking over another member. Betting in the club was outlawed and offenders were fined. Anyone drawing sick pay from a friendly society or a trade union who was found to be drinking or gaming would similarly be penalised. The language of friendly societies, mutual aid bodies and trade unions joined the language of Christian charity to what Thompson somewhat curmudgeonly concedes to be the ‘slumbering imagery of “brotherhood” in the Methodist (and Moravian) tradition’.²²

The wealth and range of these working class activities also gave a particular shape to British society. It was not so much that Britain became a nation of club members. That was and remains true. But these clubs, friendly societies, mutual aid organisations and trade unions began developing a distinctive character amongst their members while simultaneously, and without fanfare, and probably without any conscious design, bringing into existence a public domain which became self-policing.

This public domain is not to be confused with the post-1945 one-dimensional view which equated nationalisation with the public domain. The state would be looked to for providing a framework of law to protect the domain's common activities, but no one thought it was the state's responsibility to provide the services which operated here. Indeed there was a healthy scepticism about on whose side the state stood. The doctrine of the public was developed a stage further by an ideology which saw the public domain as fundamental to the development of an active and full citizenship which was itself a central objective of English Idealism, as well as for other groups.

iii) A new public ideology

I referred earlier to the rich deposits of ethical values left behind as the great tide of evangelical Christianity receded from its near domination of English culture. It was on this fertile ground that a new public ideology took root. Most of those Victorians who became plagued by doubt about the essential Christian truths hoped, nevertheless, that Christian morality would survive without being underpinned by Christian dogma. The reason why this impressive Victorian elite, described by Noel Annan as an intellectual aristocracy, saw their hopes fulfilled for so long a period of time was that Christian values were taken up both by an incipient Labour movement and were also transformed into a public ideology known as English Idealism.

Herein lies a paradox. Most schools of philosophy are concerned with winning the adherence of other philosophers. (It is an anorak's occupation par excellence.) But it was not so with English Idealism. It provided a secular home for those people who found it impossible fully to subscribe to Christian beliefs, but who wished to see the

Christian ethic continue. They saw their task as putting old wine into new bottles and, despite the New Testament warnings on the danger, they achieved a demonstrable success. English Idealism also had a distinct political goal: to provide a framework of ideas within which the minds of those set on rising to positions of power in the British Empire would be trained.

Some observers, such as the historian R G Collingwood, argue that English Idealism was at its most influential between 1880 and 1910. Others, such as Josie Harris, have suggested that its importance spread beyond World War I and swept up to the 1945 Labour Government of Clement Attlee.²³ The one set of lectures which Attlee later recalled as influencing his ideas were those delivered at Oxford in his undergraduate days by Ernest Barker, one of the most distinguished of the second generation of English Idealists.²⁴

I would argue that the influence of English Idealism, though in decline, can be seen right up to the Blair administration, providing as it does a framework within which the present British Prime Minister thinks about politics.

Despite a tortuous Germanic shell, the kernel of English Idealism was easily expressed and had a wide appeal to men and women in raising their children and in their running of local civic societies. A great motor force in life was the belief that each of us should achieve our best selves and that society should be so organised that this goal was an effective option for every member of the community. It was this belief which not only bound individuals and families together but formed the basis of public ideology which ran alongside, and then largely superseded, Christianity.

English Idealism had two additional attractions that helped secure its commanding position as a public ideology. While today what little talk there is of citizenship is confined largely to discussions about voting, or rather, lack of it, the citizenship underpinning English Idealism was much more generous and expansive. At its centre was the production of a virtuous character. In this respect, it aimed at making universal the kind of citizen which had been the preserve of a few in Ancient Greek democracy. The Victorians fell in love with most things Greek and never less than in respect to that ancient civilisation's model of active citizenship.²⁵

English Idealism's success induced further success. A public ideology, governing so much of public conduct, gave what would now appear to be an unimaginable degree of confidence to those whose role was initiating the young into the wider community. Those ever so important foot soldiers of any society, the clergy, teachers, police, factory and health inspectors, doctors, voluntary workers, and a growing host of other officials, went about their task with assurance. While they attended directly to the issues that gave rise to their position – teaching or policing, for example – they knew their work fitted into a much larger picture. They were committed to this wider goal of improving the type of character they and their charges possessed. They also knew that, if push came to shove, they would be unquestionably backed by society's most influential people. There is again a lesson here for us to bear in mind when we come to consider what options are open to us today.

Section Two: The Balkanisation of this peaceable kingdom

How then do we account for what I call the Balkanisation of this peaceable kingdom? The most obvious cause for our present discontent is that the writ of the three chief forces that shaped the British character no longer run as they once did. Christianity, Labour's mutual commonwealth and the public ideology of English Idealism are all but a shadow of their former selves, although, as we see later, English Idealism still has a strong pull on our senses. But let me emphasise again I am in no way making a plea that our political efforts should go into trying to restore this old order. I do not believe for one moment that this option is open to us. But when we come to thinking about the practical measures we might take it is important to understand that each of these influences was not a marginal after-thought for the shaping of character; they were seminal. Nor did their influence impact quickly. There was a cumulative effect over time. Similar influential and favourable forces are required now if a counter push against the growth of present day nihilism is to be successful.

Aside from our neglectfulness and failure to renew this aspect of our cultural-political heritage, our peaceful kingdom is being undermined by pro-active forces and we need to turn our attention to them. Here I see a number of agents working in the same destructive direction. Top of the list is the meltdown of largely male, semi-skilled jobs. Following hard on its heels, but inseparably linked to it, has been the sharp increase in the number of broken families and families more generally who fail to teach their children the common decencies. Thirdly, the 1944 Butler Education Act²⁶ creamed off most of the able-bodied working class children and made them socially, and often geographically, mobile. In so doing, they left their neighbours bereft of their leadership and organising skills. Fourthly, a growing and now dominant cult has been established where the individual more often than not reigns supreme over any collective or public ethos. No single one of these causes alone is responsible for the trends so apparent in British society. However, the cumulative impact of all of them – and others – is little short of devastating. First, then, what part has the collapse of semi-skilled jobs played in the rise of Britain's yobbish culture?

i) The loss of semi-skilled male jobs

I would like to focus on the one area of the country I know best, which I believe acts like a barium meal does to an x-ray, showing up in stark form what is happening to British society more generally. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Board employed in the earlier post-war period something like 16,000 dockers. These men – no women were employed in this trade – handled an import and export trade from and into the Liverpool and Birkenhead docks which was then measured at around 26 million tons per annum. Within the last two decades, the number of dockers has been reduced to 460, yet they are responsible for handling 32 million tons or so of goods coming into and leaving the port. The loss of well over 15,000 semi-skilled jobs that paid decent family wages has played a part in the rise of more than one generation without serious job opportunities — the financial basis for long-term partnership, marriage, and the raising of children.

The loss of the docks jobs combined with those skilled jobs lost in the Cammell Laird shipyard, quickly wiped out the job opportunities of a very significant part of the male workforce in the town. Whereas there has been a near 20% increase in male jobs in Britain since 1951, Birkenhead saw a fall in excess of 35%. But this total, as so often with a global figure, disguises a polarisation of opportunities. The constituency has witnessed over the same time a significant increase in people who are self-employed, have employee status or are following professional careers. This is in stark contrast to the almost 60% drop in the numbers of less skilled jobs. These data are similar to those for other poorer areas and they help to account for a growth in estranged young unskilled workers who populate the poorest areas in the country and whose badge of citizenship is often expressed in yobbish behaviour.

There has, more recently, been a significant growth in jobs outside the constituency, and particularly on the North Welsh coast. But the scale of the semi-skilled job losses has impacted on behaviour in a number of ways. Both the docks and shipyard were dangerous places in which to work, even if everybody maintained a proper sense of discipline. This degree of order established at work rippled over into the town, and the loss of this discipline, and the pride that went with it, has had an impact on the level of order in the wider community. From the earliest time of industrialisation, the order in large industrial complexes was maintained by employers and trade unions alike. Today, fewer people work in similarly large establishments in Birkenhead or elsewhere. Most now work in smaller units which do not share this collective sense.

ii) Marriage and the nurturing of children

This changing employment status, and particularly the massive haemorrhage of semi-skilled jobs, has had a significant impact on the marriage prospects of many males. It seems strange even to say this, but it is true nevertheless. A key function historically of adult males is to bring home a family wage or its equivalent. Being a financial provider was one of the most widely understood functions as husband and father and it was a role which provided status,

influence and dignity. The local ecology of family formation has been fundamentally altered by the meltdown of traditional well-paying male jobs.

The flip side of this trend has been the rise of single parent families. While there are notable exceptions to any rule, young boys find it more difficult successfully to negotiate their teenage years if they do not have a male model providing an ordered existence as they become of age. It is also a truism to say that raising children is a task which can sometimes defeat the best of two parents.

iii) Loss of parenting skills

We now need to add into this discussion the losing of parental skills more generally amongst the population. It is no coincidence that Britain becoming a peaceable kingdom was linked to a period of stable and generally confident families although, as I hope is clear from these arguments, these confident families did not emerge out of a vacuum. But it is within the furnace of families that the ethical building blocks of any community are forged for good or ill. A measure of successful families is the growth in the respect each member holds for each other and this is where one's own sense of respect takes root.

It is within the family, too, that we develop the three cardinal virtues that underpin our respect for others: a degree of politeness which makes one respectful of the needs of others; a considerateness whereby the needs of other members of the family as well as neighbours bear down on an individual's behaviour; and lastly, a degree of thoughtfulness the development of which helps us to determine what another person's needs and feelings are.

iv) Further deskilling of communities

The Butler education reforms had a perverse impact on local neighbourhoods and weakened still further an already battered family structure. Whatever the conventional wisdom about this great reform, the Act ensured that able, working-class boys and girls were 'creamed off' and pointed towards jobs which would take them in all too many instances from their local communities. While this reform

Once the rot starts

Winnie had lived in the same street for over 40 years, but over the past twelve months, things had been deteriorating. Having someone throw human excrement over her wall was the last straw, and she sought sheltered accommodation.

Winnie's street was made up largely of decent, working-class people. In fact, of the 100 families that lived there, 97 were good neighbours. But there were three families who came to Winnie's street after having been evicted from another private sector house.

The children of these families teamed up together and whacked a 50-year resident of that street on the head with a board. He moved, and his house is currently under renovation. The little gang then started attacking the house, knocking over a brick wall that had been rebuilt. A wooden defence wall has now been built around the house.

Anyone who walks in the street is liable to be verbally attacked; children who go out by themselves are likely to get smacked in the face. The language shouted at passers-by is as foul as it is violently expressed.

Appealing to the boys' mothers is like talking to a brick wall, say the residents. There are no father figures in these three families. Complaints to the authorities bring no respite.

Part of the problem is that the families are in private accommodation and the landlords simply do not care how the tenants behave, providing they get paid. One landlord, when contacted in London, said he had put people in power to sort these sorts of families out. With that, he put down the phone.

The counter-stand against the gang has been lead by a father and son who show huge courage. However, this bravery is not inexhaustible, and other families have been cowed into silence.

'I am losing it' admits one resident. 'I have never been so often to one place as I have been to Manor Road [the local police station]. But nothing happens. Officials don't give a toss how we live. These families have turned a decent place into a shit hole. I have been here 35 years. I have never seen anything like it. If we vote again it will be to vote out the councillors'.

was beneficial to the individuals concerned, and society generally, it had a major impact in the way it robbed local communities of many of its natural leaders. Individuals whose strength of character placed them into leadership roles, and who were natural living role models of decent behaviour, have long since quit their humble backgrounds for a life elsewhere. Trade unions and local authorities have similarly been weakened by the loss of these high achieving individuals, while mutual aid organisations of any size have almost disappeared.

Decline of a collective public culture

Let me conclude this section by stressing how the loss of a sense of the public domain has played a role in the process of disruption and decline of the peaceable kingdom.

The prophesying witches in Macbeth chanted, as you may remember, ‘Hubble, bubble, toil and trouble’ . Into today’s equivalent of the witch’s cauldron of skilled and semi-skilled job losses and broken families, is stirred the inexorable rise of an individualistic culture. This culture operates on two levels. The first is that it is blind to the rules of engagement that once policed the public domain we all enter as we close our front doors. Rules regulating the self-respect of people living in close proximity to each other, and which were crafted out of necessity, are now bulldozed by the defiant cry of ‘why?’ And the plain truth is that it is impossible to run a society whose basic rules of engagement are subjected to this destructive question. There simply is not the time or the energy constantly to go back to first principles and explain the purpose of a particular rule. So the question ‘why?’ conquers ever more territory reducing it to little more than anarchy.

On a second level, a culture glorifying the now strips away any sense of being responsible for one’s own actions. This culture change has been so profound that it is difficult to see how that world we have now lost is joined to the world in which we now inhabit. Some of the best examples of an ethic of non-responsibility come from Theodore Dalrymple whose work as a hospital and prison psychiatrist gave him an insight into this way of life that is little short of terrifying. The ‘beer went mad ... the knife went in’ are all actions which allegedly control the individual rather than the other way round.²⁷

There is one last factor which must be taken into account when trying to explain the Balkanisation of peaceful Britain. It is the carelessness, taken to the point of irresponsibility, with which we have not attended to reinvesting in the social capital that underpinned our peaceable kingdom. The country has sleepwalked away from an acknowledgement that the kind of citizenship we had inherited is one which has to be constantly worked out, modified and above all renewed.

The rich concept of citizenship which we inherited did not come down Mount Sinai already engraved on tablets of stone and able to weather the blast of changing social norms. Rather, our ancestors knew that the kind of citizen we are is almost totally dependent on the forces that shape our collective character. And, as we have seen, our inheritance on this score was the product of the ethic built up by Christian morality, the Labour movement reflecting this ethic in its own institutions, and the hugely powerful set of social rules which English Idealism laid down for the whole country. While only a mere skeleton is left of these three forces, it was widely assumed that somehow the type of character that these forces produced would continue. No effort, until recently, has been put into developing a new public ideology which could compensate for those we have lost. The consequences of this failure were slow to appear and most of us, including myself, were reluctant to accept that the peaceable world which we once inhabited was being destroyed before our very eyes. Then the pace of disintegration suddenly and rapidly changed.

Section Three: Respect under attack

For all of these reasons and more – a drink and drugs culture and a media which glorifies violence and more generally yobbish behaviour – the culture of respect is now under sustained and heavy bombardment. While it is now the number one issue so far as my constituents are concerned, it was far from being so when I was first elected MP for Birkenhead 26 years ago. I would receive during the earlier part of this stewardship occasional reports of loutish and even thuggish behaviour. But these citations were very irregular at first.

Even when such examples in the break up of civility were reported to me on a more regular basis I continued to compartmentalise them as appalling actions. But they were definitely exceptions.

I remember as if it were yesterday the conversation that blew apart this old world security for me. Almost 10 years ago, a group of pensioners filed into the Friday evening surgery which I hold at Birkenhead Town Hall. They were all smartly turned out to meet their MP. The room in which I meet my constituents is a small office. Without any fuss those with the greatest disabilities were guided by the others to the few chairs which faced the desk that I borrow for the evening session.

I reeled under the tale they told me. Young lads, not much more than ten years old, if that, ran incessantly across the roofs of their bungalows, or stole up silently in the night to unleash a hail of fists on their sitting room windows once the curtains were drawn on a winter's night. The same group would jump out of the shadows if any of the pensioners had the temerity to return home after dark. Urinating through the letterboxes was just one example of their extreme depravity.

Once I could draw enough breath to speak I asked if they had sought police help. They had. What was the response? A look of pity began to cross the face of the pensioner I was looking at. She was clearly wondering what privileged world I lived in. The police can do nothing. They have no power and the lads are under age, the chorus agreed.

Here before me was a group of working-class pensioners who were some of the finest examples of Englishmen and Englishwomen. Their virtuous lives were what made living in England precious. This group had always believed in putting more into society than they thought it right to take from it. Now they needed help. But no effective help was forthcoming. The 'system' simply did not know how to respond.

I realised immediately that this was a pivotal point in my life as an MP. The agenda had suddenly changed and my constituents were helping me to define it. The politics of class, in which I had learned what political skills I had, was fast being replaced by the politics of

behaviour. British politics was in uncharted territory with no ethical compass to give direction. There were no off-the-shelf solutions that practising politicians could simply hand to their constituents. Politics had to be remade to match the new circumstances.

The task was doubly challenging. Reform is invariably a difficult and often hazardous process. But some reforms are easier to achieve than others. Modernising the National Health Service might be complex and demanding, but at least the service is in existence. Moreover, because the Government has been running the service for 50 years or more, it brings to the task of reform a great deal of technical and practical knowledge of what might and might not work. It also has some feel for the most likely indirect consequences of any particular reform.

Not so with the politics of respect. Here Governments have no record of involvement. Britain's long march to respectability, as we have seen, was one originated with and was organised by the people, without government interference. Indeed Government action in the moulding of behaviour would not only have been thought of as dangerous, but would also have been an unacceptable intrusion into those areas where no government should tread.

Similarly, because politics is in new territory, mistakes and misjudgements are more likely to be made. Politicians will therefore have to acquire new skills (not something they relish) – not simply in the creation of policies, but in a willingness to admit quickly what is working and, more importantly, what is not. In forging this new agenda it is important to realise that the outcome is of greatest importance to what were once Labour's core voters. Before touching on this theme our discussion needs first to outline the shape of the new politics.

Undermining authority

The cry which becomes ever more common from my constituents is simply put. Given the collapse of basic decencies we have seen over the past five years alone, what will life be like in ten years' time, let alone when their grandchildren are beginning their own families? And this fear merely assumes the rot continuing at the same rate. In fact, many constituents (and I share this prognosis) see events as showing every sign of accelerating.

Constituents sense that many of the causes of our present discontent are deep-seated and have been building up for many decades. But a single extrapolation of present trends, let alone the nightmare scenario of the whole process gaining greater and greater momentum as it sweeps all before it, signals the urgency of beginning an effective counter-strategy. This new behaviour is bred in families and it is schools that are increasingly manning the trenches in what is nothing less than a war for civilisation as we know it.

No one should under-rate the pressure many schools are already under. No one is quite sure where Carey is at the moment. She should have been in school but isn't. When she does attend, she and a small band like her, bring a sense of palpable unease to the entire building. A good week for the counter-truant team often results in a bad week for the school.

Carey is looked after by her Nan. Grandparents are increasingly acting as parents, grandparents and foster-parents all rolled into one. The reason why so many nans are becoming parents to their grandchildren is quite simple: drugs, drink or both. And, as is becoming more common, Carey's mum is a drug addict.

As her Nan became older, Carey wrestled out of her control. Slowly Nan's authority was undermined, and there was no one around to help her to repair and strengthen the human dykes which families build to defend civilised behaviour. These defences were simply overwhelmed by Carey's wilful wrongdoing.

The crucial battle Nan lost was to prevent Carey falling in with Jason's gang. She knew the importance of the battle, but was simply no match for it. Carey now chooses how she would live her life, when to come in at night, if she would go to school, and when she would get blotto with drink.

Section Four: So what is to be done?

In Britain's peaceable kingdom an unwritten contract between the citizens reigned. Britain was largely self-governing in the sense that the law was a shadow in the background rather than an active weapon manning the barricades against disorder. How is this lost world to be regained? It will most certainly not be regained if our attempts are simply directed to reinstating those structural forces which governed the lost world. The idea that Britain is on the brink of a new evangelical revival type experience is belied by what we see and hear. There is much evidence of strong evangelical revival in certain parishes, but even a number of such swallows do not make a revivalist's summer.

Nor, sadly, is it relevant to think to something akin to the rise of Labour's mutual commonwealth. The harsh world which gave rise to such a majestic response is no longer with us, thank goodness. That does not mean that the role the ethical inspiration of Labour's founders and foot soldiers alike is not of the greatest importance when we consider what is to be done. But that great urge to do good, and to help transform the world into a better and more civilised place, has to be recast. And this recasting has to be in a manner which helps give the politics of behaviour wings rather than compounding this task into an essentially reactionary position.

i) A social 'Highway Code'²⁸

Likewise there is one part of the world we have lost – a public ideology – which has to be salvaged and recast. That urge to see a better world has to be reflected in a set of beliefs – or a 'social' Highway Code – to which practically the whole nation can subscribe, by which they actively live and on the basis of which they apply a whole series of rewards and punishments. How might this process begin?

To start answering that question we need to go back to the root cause of the collapse of respect and the rise in its place of yobbism and variously unpleasant degrees of anti social behaviour. I hope the answer I intend to provide is already pretty obvious to the reader.

The root cause of our present discontent is the rise of the

dysfunctional family. At best, these families behave similar to a litter of puppies where each member of the litter does precisely what he or she wants with little or no regard for other members, and no member shows any sign of leadership. There are, of course, those families where parents still know what the common decencies are, but who have lost control of their young. Other families have never gained a proper degree of control. Worse still are what are rightly deemed ‘neighbours from hell’. Here, the whole family is engaged in low-grade terrorism against their neighbours and wider local community. The crudeness and callousness of these families is past all understanding.

There have always been some families meeting one of these three descriptions. But the dysfunctional types were so rare that their existence was truly shocking. Their very rarity made them manageable: they were not numerous enough to overturn the decency of their neighbours. The situation was manageable in another sense: the bounds of the old contract – that one’s self respect is based on the respect awarded by one’s fellow creatures – held fast in the face of the occasional insurgency. Such neighbours were corralled by the unseen fences the vast majority of decent families constructed in defence of their way of life. But such defences – such as snubbing such families – are far less effective against a large and continuous attack mounted each and every day and by families who care nothing for the views their neighbours hold of them.

This is why a successful strategy has to have two clear but related parts. It must first build up an effective strategy on how best to hold the line against the new barbarism. (It is this aspect which has so far dominated the prime minister’s ‘respect’ agenda.)²⁹ The second part of the strategy is more challenging and has consequently attracted much less attention. I intend to concentrate here on this second element which is how to cut the supply routes to vulgar and uncivilised behaviour.

Why am I hopeful, indeed confident, that such a strategy can both be devised and implemented? My bullish beliefs are based solely on what I see in my constituency and what other people – normally by writing to me – attest for other parts of the country.

English Idealism has sunk deep into our consciousness. There is still a widespread agreement that each of us should strive to achieve our best and that we should so order our society that other people similarly can make the most of their best talents.

Indeed, one reason why there is such widespread support for the Prime Minister's strategy for holding the line against unacceptable behaviour is the common acceptance that rules and guidelines are necessary, even for the best of us. Most people do not need a rules-based culture to live the good life. But even for this group such rules provide a framework and affirm that their own instincts are good and shared by the majority of their fellow citizens. The rules act, in other words, as a reassurance to individuals as they plan out their lives.

There is also, I sense, widespread agreement that we need to restore a culture which is not simply about forbidding uncouthness, but which is more positively based on what is perceived as being good. While restrictions are necessary, a good society cannot be nurtured by such a one-dimensional approach. Restrictions should only feature as part of a comprehensive approach if we are to regain a world where, in Sir Geoffrey Elton's phrase, we have to again take on board the fact that people living close by each other 'need both to be conscious of one another and leave one another alone'. How might this be achieved?

ii) Affirming the entry into society

The first step is to universalise those rites of passage which mark our common humanity. When the British Expeditionary Force went to France in 1914 practically the whole of the army had been baptised, i.e. had undergone a rite of passage marking their advent into a wider community beyond that of their families. Baptism can no longer play this role. But an initiation to the wider society could easily be constructed around the registration of each child's birth. A welcoming ceremony should be to baptism what a registry office ceremony is to church weddings. Indeed, the registrar would be the ideal person to carry out the ceremony.

Letter from a Birkenhead constituent

I am writing to see if you could find out what is happening to a Public House where I work very close to. It is called the Signet and is on the corner of Watson Street and St Anne Street, Birkenhead.

When the resident landlord left last year a temporary manager was appointed. She stayed a couple of weeks and left. The pub was left empty till they appointed a new manager. But before he could take over it was set on fire. Since then it has been left for the vandals and local drug addicts to destroy. It has been flooded out and set alight again. Youths climb on the flat part of the roof drinking alcohol then throw the empty bottles down to the ground regardless of who may be passing below. Also tiles have been taken from the roof and thrown to the ground. The police don't come any more as they say they haven't the manpower. Even when they did the vandals had gone before they arrived.

Since the pub closed last year local businesses have suffered greatly. The local Post Office was closed causing hardship to the old and disabled people in the area. The chemist is closing shortly and the local convenience store is being forced to close, not all through the vandals but through the lack of business as people don't come to St Anne Street like they used to.

The people who own the pub, Enterprise Inns, have done little or nothing to keep the building in a good state of repair or get it up and running as a going public house as it was twelve months ago. Their reluctance to sell the property and lack of security of the building has brought about a general decline in the area.

I have the names of four people who have put in genuine offers for the pub who would repair it and get it up and running again. But Enterprise has declined their offers. Surely they can be forced to sell, or repair and make safe the building?

Such an event would allow society to register (literally and metaphorically) what it wants for and expects from each child. Likewise, the parents would be reminded of their duties to nurture their child. I have suggested elsewhere the basis for a child, parent and society contract.³⁰ Similarly, the Bar Mitzvah celebration of childhood giving away to adulthood, and confirmation as the Christian rite of passage into a similar status, should be universalised in a secular form becoming part of the national curriculum.

iii) Education in parenting

When I have asked pupils what they most want from their school, and how we might codify their wishes into a more formal contract, the replies have been surprisingly uniform. Pupils want their schools to be safer (suggesting bullying is a much bigger issue than we believe). They wish to acquire the skills to make life-long friends. They aim to gain the qualifications that would interest a good employer. They wish to become good parents.

The re-emphasis on social virtues – how to regard other people – needs to form a key plank in any parenting course. These courses should form part of the national curriculum³¹ as well as courses for parents as they begin to form their families. Here the aim is not to add to the length of the national curriculum, but to see which parts of the existing curriculum could be adapted to help focus on good parenting. English literature could include those books where different types of parenting are studied. Similarly the science/biology courses should look at the importance animals attach to nurturing their young and how vital the role of nurturing is for forming the basis of a happy childhood.

The parenting courses, in addition, should cover two other major themes. They must offer a better understanding of what the major needs of all children are. Likewise, the building up of a checklist on how best to promote healthy and happy children should form the other major theme. What are the most profitable acts potential parents can perform to give the best start in life to each of their children?

The careful preparation for successful foster parenting is in marked contrast to the total absence of help and training for the most important nurturing functions of parents. An important part of general parenting courses should be the study of what is expected of those people who wish to become foster parents and then of universalising this approach to all parents. Again I have set out elsewhere the outline of a contract entitled *Every parent a wanted parent*.³²

The preference of pupils to be good parents is shared by a very large number of parents themselves. Surveys show that parents wished that they had had opportunities to increase their skills as they began to form their families. If parenting classes became a standard part of pre-natal courses, they would serve as a refresher course to what will have been taught in schools as part of the national curriculum.

iv) Welfare as guide

Attaching specific behaviour or conditions to benefits signals a fundamental change in welfare's role. The case for this move therefore needs to be spelt out. For the majority of the population the establishment of a raft of rights to welfare has been wholly beneficial, freeing them from the fear of destitution. This impact has not, however, been universal. For some, unconditional welfare declares that no behaviour is so out of bounds that the right to a minimum income is forgone. Taking away the assumption that

Behaviour in school: Letter from a Crewe teacher

There had been recent discussion as to how children should be punished for abusing and assaulting teachers. I think that children should be named and shamed in the same way teachers are if they abuse/assault children, or even if they are simply accused of doing so!

I am a teacher at a local secondary school (in Crewe) and live near the school. There are also some of the children I teach who live nearby. There is a gang of 15/16 year old children

who I teach who have for some months now constantly and relentlessly harassed me! When I take my dog for a walk they will follow me for a while, shouting comments and throw small things at me such as chewing gum, tightly rolled up bits of paper etc. When I go to the shops with my young daughter or with family members, the same things happen.

My parents also receive abuse when out with their dogs. Only the other day they were out and a member of this gang shouted out to them, 'Oi you, we hate your fucking daughter'. There was nothing they could do about this!

I have contacted the police who tell me there is nothing they can do! I have spoken to a solicitor who also says there is nothing I can do. I have even contacted my teaching union who are also helpless! So, it would seem that I must continue to put up with this bullying, abuse and assault and these youngsters will never have to face the consequences of their anti-social and indeed criminal acts!!

If a child lied through its teeth and simply accused me of any of these acts, I bet within the hour I'd be in a police cell, jobless and considered a threat to society and to my community etc. As of yet I have not retaliated and have remained professional at all times! But crimes continue to be committed against me and it would appear I have no rights, but children have many!

Teachers are now being given the joy (?) of teaching citizenship in school. How the hell do I teach citizenship to youngsters who are allowed to go out of the school gate and do as they please? They are fully aware of the fact that they can get away with almost anything, and never have to face the consequences of their acts!

Those who arty-farty round children's rights, etc, need to take a long hard look at what is going on. We will regret this; we are bringing up a generation who really believe that they can do as they please, and indeed they can and do!

My current situation is causing me dilemmas! Do I leave my job? Why should I? I love my job and the majority of pupils at my school are well behaved young people! Moving home isn't an option either. But surely I can't be expected to continue to put up with this forever more or for as long as I live and teach here?

welfare will always be paid irrespective of a claimant's behaviour is a crucial part of any successful strategy to re-establish common decencies.

Introducing specific welfare contracts is not an act which will single welfare out for different treatment. The extent to which there is different treatment is precisely because there is no welfare contract. Houses are bought on mortgage contracts. Tenants have to sign their tenancy agreements. There is a written and unwritten contract, for example, for each of us while we are at work. Employees have to turn up to work on time, perform their duties, often dress in a certain way and behave with a degree of civility to their colleagues. Pay and employment are conditional on meeting these basic but fundamental requirements.

The welfare contract would see the beginnings of a balance being introduced between the rights and entitlements on one side of the equation with the social responsibilities on the other. On the Government's side, the contract should detail the contributions and income qualifying rules, together with the rights to benefit in a form which can be legally enforced by the claimants. Part of this side of the contract would be to detail what service the claimants would have a right to expect in the delivery of their benefits.

The other side of the contract must reflect what the duties of each citizen are. The duty side of the contract would include the kind of citizens which we as a society demand each of us should be. The cardinal virtues of citizenship would be listed. And those virtues would be grounded in a general statement of how citizens would be expected to behave towards each other in order not to cause continual grievance or annoyance – just as the rule books for friendly societies and trade unions listed what was acceptable behaviour. The consequences of a failure to maintain this standard of behaviour would, as in those rule books of old, be clearly spelled out.

Conditional welfare: Letter from a Welsh age pensioner

I realise that one must not be over-censorious, especially in an area like the Rhondda the economic *raison d'être* for which more or less vanished a generation ago with the closure of pits and shutdown of heavy industry. At the same time I cannot help noticing that my neighbours on either side in this street, one of whom is the serial-criminal addressee of the Pontypridd County Court judgement in my favour last year, and both of whom I know to be tenants of the same publicly-subsidised 'housing benefit' landlord who has not even troubled to hide her anxiety to acquire my house to complete her 'portfolio', are able to afford motor cars and satellite television as well as a total of twelve illegitimate children, whilst I cannot even run to a terrestrial television licence.

The 'politics of envy' are distasteful and run counter to the sort of Christian virtues so admirably espoused by our inspiring Archbishop. But I do agree that there ought to be some sort of social *quid pro quo* for state benefits, if only because my neighbours so perfectly illustrate the old adage about the work Satan makes for idle hands. I have reservations, I must say, about your* suggestions for taking away child benefit. Having borne five children of my own, I feel only pity for the little mites, even when (as here) they are encouraged by feckless parents who in turn are being egged on by Rachmannite landlords, to indulge in the sort of petty harassments which go to make everyday life intolerable for elderly people. In a situation like mine, it is the landlords who need to be hit in the pockets which are all they are bothered about. I don't know whether you realise this, but in this street houses which cost less than £10K command annual Housing Benefit rentals, entirely paid for by the Exchequer, of £4k. Such economics positively invite harassment of respectable elderly owner-occupiers.

* It was, in fact, the Prime Minister's suggested reform.

Section Five: Respect – a left wing cause

I end by sounding a note of urgency. Effective action has to be taken soon if the inheritance of our peaceful kingdom is not to be irrecoverably lost. As the traditions of civility come under renewed and more widespread attack, fewer people have the confidence to challenge a boorish—even brutish—minority. To do so is already a pretty hazardous occupation.

In forging this new agenda for the politics of behaviour it is important to realise that the outcome is of greatest importance to what were once Labour's core voters. The first is the most immediate. For those on low incomes living near, let alone next door to, a neighbour from hell, we rarely provide a hiding place. Society has yet to fashion an effective remedy against so much of the low-grade terrorism which masquerades as anti-social behaviour. Those of us with bank balances are not so restrained. We are trained to be persistent when making complaints. Our bank balances ensure our access to legal advice and that we will not be fobbed off by well-intentioned gate-keepers. And if the 'legal frighteners' approach does not work, we can simply move.

No such option is open to the poor who have to persuade housing officials that they should be allowed to live elsewhere. The chance of doing so is of course almost nil. As one constituent exclaimed to me: 'We are all trying to get out of here.' And yet, there are simply too few houses available to rent in safer areas. Hence, one of the first laws of the new politics of behaviour is that the lower the person's income, the greater priority that person will generally give to decent public behaviour.

The poor and the working class lose out in another important respect and here is the second reason why I believe the culture of respect should be restored to its once seminal position in left wing politics. As the ethic of common decency is eroded, fewer public places and spaces remain free from the threat of disorder. And it is the poor again for whom these spaces are more important. Those people fortunate enough to be high up the income scale can and do spend long times away from yobbish Britain. And when they

are at home they have the ability to pay for substitute policing of the common places surrounding their homes. We have already seen the rise of the gated estates for the rich in Britain and they are reminiscent of those small park developments which became such a characteristic of early Victorian towns. This option of a separate, safe, gated existence, is not open to the poor, and to many of the working class.

Now to the third reason why the ethic of respect has been central to Labour culture. Like all values that take on a life of their own, this ethic spread from the grass roots upwards until it was upheld almost universally throughout the entire labour movement. Indeed, it is difficult to think of the birth of the Labour movement separate from the ethic of respect. This ethic helped to bring a distinct Labour movement into existence and it consequently lies deep in the movement's roots. How can we capitalise on a form of politics which began with individuals and families making their own rules and only later became part of what we see today as national politics?

Peter Clark has drawn the important distinction between ethical and mechanical reformers.³³ Ethical reformers are those who see a change in behaviour bringing about a fundamental reform in the wider society. Mechanical reformers, on the other hand, see politics as a process whereby national strategies are imposed from the top downwards. Both approaches have elements we must employ in the new politics of behaviour.

The content of these three contracts needs to be based on the results of a debate operating at local levels which is then codified as the results are correlated. The approach to the politics of behaviour will therefore quickly emerge as one which combines the two approaches radicals adopted at the turn of the 19th century. It will draw its strength from those beliefs thankfully still held by a majority of us on what constitutes the basis for civilised existence and how this behaviour has to be lived out in each of our lives. But, because of the crumbling away of the moral authority which underpinned our self governance, it is necessary to marry the strengths of an ethical approach with those who see the importance of mechanical reform.

The contracts have to be national but for them to become living documents they need to be under regular revision with participants improving on what should always be seen as working documents regularly adapted as this aspect of the national debate takes on a life of its own.

We must be clear about our aim. It is not to have more rules, more legislation from above. The great strength of our once peaceable kingdom lies in its self-governing nature. Society cannot force people to behave decently on anything like the mass scale that is required if the freedom inherent in a civilised life is to be open to each of us. The ethical model of politics is therefore as crucial as ever. The exercise of contract politics is primarily about ensuring, as far as we can, that these basic rules of behaviour take root again and become affairs of the heart. The law has an important part to play, but the aim must be for civil society once again to return the law to what it does best, acting as a fall-back, and only a fall-back, to a strong, self-governing society.

Endnotes

- ¹ The term comes from A.H.Halsey and Norman Dennis, *Ethical Socialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).
- ² Field's argument here has a certain affinity with Max Weber's famous thesis regarding the link between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* London: Routledge, 1930). Weber argues that Protestant sects like Calvinism created a set of values which later underpinned the methodical pursuit of capital accumulation as a 'vocation,' even though the theological rationale for such behaviour had fallen away. Similarly, Field suggests that 20th century respectability and virtue emanated from religious origins and persisted even after their religious imperative had faded.
- ³ Nicole Billante and Peter Saunders, *Six Questions About Civility* CIS Occasional Paper 82, Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, 2002.
- ⁴ On the percentage of adults claiming to attend church regularly, the World Values Survey ranks the UK 22nd of 53 countries at 27%, while Australia comes in 30th at 16% (www.nationmaster.com). However, the UK figure looks to be inflated, and figures for England alone would certainly be much lower. Alasdair Crockett and David Voas (*Religion in Britain: Neither believing nor belonging*, University of Essex CHIMERA seminar, 16 October 2004) estimate adult church attendance in Britain at around 15%. This compares with a National Church Life Survey estimate that 19% of Australians attend church at least once a month (<http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?docid=2276>).
- ⁵ A recent Productivity Commission report measures 'social capital' according to the proportion of people who believe most of their fellow citizens can be trusted. Australia, the UK and the USA cluster together around the middle of the international range at between 35% and 40% (see Jennifer Buckingham (ed), *State of the Nation* CIS 2004, Table 3.9). Nearly one-third of adult Australians have some involvement in voluntary work each year (<http://www.volunteering.com.au/statistics/index.asp>). The figure for the UK, 22 million adults, is roughly comparable (<http://www.ivr.org.uk/facts.htm>).
- ⁶ In the UK, 21% of children live with only one parent. In Australia, the figure is 20%. In both countries, the rise in single parenthood is due both to increased divorce/separation and to an increase in the number of unpartnered mothers. Marriage rates have declined, and divorce rates risen, in both countries. See Patricia Morgan, *Farewell to the Family?* (London: IEA Health & Welfare Unit, 1999); Barry Maley,

- Family and Marriage in Australia* CIS Policy Monograph 53, (Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, 2001).
- 7 In the UK, 17% of adults rely on income support payments (David Green, *Benefit Dependency: How welfare undermines independence*, IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1998). The Australian figure is exactly the same (Peter Saunders, *Australia's Welfare Habit, and how to kick it*, CIS, 2004).
 - 8 Don Weatherburn, 'Law and order blues', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 35 (2002), 127-144; Peter Saunders and Nicole Billante, 'Does prison work?' *Policy* vol.18, no.4, Summer 2002-03, 3-11.
 - 9 The Institute of Alcohol Studies in Britain reports: 'Binge drinking (defined in this case as consumption of 5 or more standard drinks in a single drinking occasion) accounts for a higher proportion of drinking occasions in the UK than in numerous other countries.' For example, 40% of drinking in the UK is binge drinking, more than double the figures for France, Italy or Germany ('Binge Drinking: Nature, Prevalence and Causes' <http://www.ias.org.uk/factsheets/binge-drinking.pdf>). A 2003 study by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in the UK found one in three men and one in five women fail to drink 'sensibly,' and that binge-drinking which was once confined to the late teens now often runs from ages 16 to 24 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/3121440.stm>). It is much the same story in Australia where research in 2002 by Professor Tim Stockwell of the National Drug Research Institute (*Medical Journal of Australia* 2002;176:91-92) found 'Australia is a nation of binge drinkers, with hazardous drinking particularly common in young adults' (<http://www.mydr.com.au/default.asp?Article=3515>). 67% of alcohol consumed in Australia is drunk in a way that is dangerous to health, and hazardous drinking is particularly common in the 18-24 years age group.
 - 10 *Six Questions About Civility*
 - 11 For example, Peter West, from the University of Western Sydney, suggests the root of the Sydney rioting lies in the collapse of male, adult authority in the lives of young boys. 'Sydney's burning, but why did it happen?' (*Online Opinion*, <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=3954>)
 - 12 Noel Pearson has proposed extending conditional welfare in Aboriginal communities, and Peter Costello recently floated the idea that Parenting Payments for all Australians should be made conditional on adequate performance of parenting responsibilities ('The virtue of choice of the

choice of virtue: Re-thinking Family Policy', *Looking Forward*, vol.2, Summer 2005). For a discussion of the issues involved, see Peter Saunders 'Self-help beats hand-out state' *The Australian* 6 December 2005.

- ¹³ The problem of finding a functional substitute for religion has preoccupied social scientists for the best part of two hundred years. Auguste Comte famously believed that science could become the new religion, but loss of faith in science and ideas of 'progress' has been almost as great as the loss of faith in religion. In *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Allen & Unwin, 1964, first published in 1917), Emile Durkheim suggested that the cohesive functions of religion could be reproduced in other symbolic systems (such as the symbols of nationhood), but the horrors of the National Socialism or Communism, where whole populations were mobilised and regimented to achieve national unity and shared purpose, make this a less attractive prospect today than it may have seemed when he was writing. It is, therefore, difficult to envisage a set of 'rational' and democratic institutions that could hope to fill the void left by the collapse of religious belief and dogma without smothering people's individuality.
- ¹⁴ 'Ms O'Shane said she believed there were no longer 'community standards' in relation to such behaviour and that police accounts that Richardson had told them 'youse are f...ed' was not a proper basis for his arrest because that type of language was 'to be expected on George Street at that time of night.'" Brad Clifton, 'The yobbo's reward' *Daily Telegraph* 18 October 2005
- ¹⁵ Geoffrey Elton, *The History of England*, CUP, 1984, 15-16
- ¹⁶ Sexual intercourse began/In nineteen sixty-three/(Which was rather late for me), Philip Larkin, *Annus Mirabilis*, 1974
- ¹⁷ Josie Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870 to 1914*, Oxford, 1993, 209-210, italics added
- ¹⁸ A J P Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, Penguin, 1981, 25
- ¹⁹ Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen: the godless Victorian*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984, 146
- ²⁰ E P Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, 1980, 457
- ²¹ *Making of the English Working Class*, 457.
- ²² *Making of the English Working Class*, 462. [editor's note: The Australian friendly societies had similar rules – see David Green and Lawrence Cromwell, *Mutual Aid or Welfare State* George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984]

- ²³ Josie Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, chapter 8. See also her essay 'Political thought and the state' in *The boundaries of the state in modern Britain*, ed. S J D Green and R C Whiting, CUP, 1996, for the extent to which the 1945 settlement had little ideological underpinning
- ²⁴ Trevor Burridge, *Clement Attlee: a political biography*, Cape, 1985, 18.
- ²⁵ Frank Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*, New Haven, 1981.
- ²⁶ [editor's note] The 1944 Education Act, sponsored by the then Education Minister R.A. Butler, set up a new system of state secondary education in which an examination at the age of eleven selected children for 'grammar', 'technical' or general ('modern') schools. The Act is widely credited with having opened up opportunities for working class children to go to grammar schools, and from there to university or into the professions, but the tripartite system of secondary education was largely scrapped in the 1960s and 1970s in favour of 'comprehensive' secondary schooling.
- ²⁷ Theodore Dalrymple, *Our culture, what is left of it*, Chicago, 2005.
- ²⁸ [editor's note] *The Highway Code* is a book of traffic rules, some formal laws, some merely advisory, which all UK motorists are expected to learn prior to taking a driving test and gaining a driver's licence.
- ²⁹ [editor's note] The Blair government has responded to the breakdown of civility by introducing a system of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, which allow the police to place restrictions on unruly people and to bring them before the courts if they flout them, and Parenting Orders, which can compel parents to control their unruly children. It has also established a 'Respect Task Force,' based in the Home Office, which aims to bring inter-departmental cooperation to bear on problems of bad parenting, anti-social behaviour, public drunkenness, disruptive school pupils, etc.
- ³⁰ Frank Field, *Neighbours from hell: The politics of behaviour*, Politico, 2003, 105
- ³¹ [editor's note] The UK has a 'national curriculum' specifying subject matter and standards of attainment for all state schools.
- ³² As above, 120-121.
- ³³ Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats*, CUP, 1976, 14-18



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