

THE POVERTY INDUSTRY

I'm sick of hearing about these things... hostels, night shelters, outreach teams, rough sleeping, day centres... homelessness. Get real! Most of the so-called “solutions” to the state of poverty do little more than provide a sticking-plaster that will suppress one or more symptoms for a day or two, but... surprise, surprise... permit, sometimes even encourage, the malady to re-emerge, often astonishingly quickly, and sometimes even in a more virulent form.

The pathology of poverty seems to have quite a lot in common with that of many illnesses. And, as hopefully we all now realise, the expedient of simply covering up an illness for a period of time, has little to do with providing an actual cure. It has more to do with passing the buck, keeping bums on seats in the related support service industries, and ultimately further lining the already over-bloated pockets of “big pharma” execs and their shareholders.

The same is true of many aspects of the poverty industry and its highly visible and extremely profitable sidekick, the homelessness industry, which seem to have more to do with creating warm, fuzzy feelings in the hearts of the many donors – governmental, institutional, and private – than providing real help where it's actually needed and has a chance of doing some good.

I can see lots of well-intended compassion, however misdirected. But where's the respect? Do you seriously believe that treating the sufferers of poverty – often not of their own making – like patients in some sort of 19th century asylum, effectively, if not technically, devoid of rights, except the right to be treated patronisingly as second-class citizens – actually improves the situation or contributes in any form whatsoever to alleviating the problems? Perhaps granting the lucky amongst them a bed in a shared hostel dormitory of doubtful safety; stuffing sandwiches (often of a type they would not normally choose to eat) down their throats, and giving them a cup of vaguely coffee-flavoured hot water at some god-awful time of night; then patting them on the head the next morning to send them on their way to fight yet another day.

The above scenario is contemporary reality. It is happening now, in this so-called civilised country. Don't get me wrong, it certainly can help, and does have a value, if somewhat limited and fleeting... but is more suited to the world of emergency relief aid in times of natural disaster than dealing with a long-term virulent epidemic of gargantuan proportions.

Who actually benefits from this in the long term? Certainly not the intended beneficiaries, since such aid only helps further stigmatise the poor and homeless, perpetuating the suffering and humiliation. It also creates a culture of subservient dependence.

True, as a government portfolio bearer or NGO executive with a mandate to “eradicate poverty” or, at a more lowly level, to “eradicate homelessness”, or as a charity CEO, or corporate “outreach” worker, you will no doubt sleep easier in your beds in the knowledge that you have done your bit to help “get someone off the street.”

You have certainly achieved something – possibly something in itself quite laudable. You may even have helped prolong a person's life for another day or two. But prolonged it for exactly what?

Your efforts might even have gone so far as to result in getting a homeless person a job. But what sort of job are you actually getting these poor people into? Typically the type that nobody else wants... and the type that the results of a recent McKinsey Global (MGI) report indicate might well become entirely obsolete by the year 2030 due to the rapid deployment of advanced automation and AI technologies. But still, another vacancy filled... let's update the benefits records and recalculate

entitlements! And as a tax-payer, you can now delight in subsidising another low-paying job. Time for more warm, fuzzy feelings, or possibly angst, depending upon your perceptions and sensibilities.

Let's set the record straight... I admit to not being your archetypical homeless person, although I am technically homeless and have spent most of the past year living on the streets of London. In fact I spent the previous 17 years out of the UK in several other countries, most recently assisting with various social initiatives.

When I returned to England I was very shocked. Perhaps I shouldn't have been, since here is just another manifestation of an ongoing global trend. Nevertheless I was genuinely shocked to see the widening gap between what used to be known as the "haves" and "have nots". On a dubiously positive note, you might be relieved to know that the situation is actually significantly worse in many other European countries where corruption, to a greater or lesser extent, is still the order of the day and the poor can be totally disenfranchised with zero hope, short of through revolution, of any improvement in their situations. And that's why so many from other parts of the world have made their way here. Being an impoverished outsider here is infinitely better than being just another fatality there. But I digress. Back to the situation in the UK...

Where is the humanity? Where are the long-term solutions? We are still only witnessing sticking-plasters that can do little more than manipulate the statistics.

"I am not a number. I am a real person"

The solution would seem to be obvious. And very much along the lines of Lord John Bird's and The Big Issue's initiatives to address root causes and find permanent solutions.

I would also say that, having spent most of my life working in many diverse areas of business, at the most fundamental level the answer to reducing and ultimately eliminating poverty is primarily one of education... in many of its manifestations... along the lines of the well-known axiom:

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

In reality this is not difficult and it will cost very much less in the long term than the existing multiplicity of sticking-plaster solutions. And from my own investigations, there is no lack of interest from many of the impoverished themselves. However, this can only be achieved through compassion, encouragement, and demonstration. Not through coercion and the whip.

It also involves first of all identifying and resolving the fundamental issues that brought about individual conditions of poverty in the first place. Since failure to do this up-front will most likely condemn the next stage to failure... as we already see so often today. Thus most assistance must be personalised at the individual level through tailor-made solutions, and not by applying the prevailing (and unsuccessful) one-size-fits-all remedies, that might facilitate an initial high throughput of "treated cases", but will ultimately lead to a prolongation of the problem, an unsuccessful outcome, and an escalation in the number of cases, as we are already witnessing resultant from current methods.

It also involves educating people to avoid exploitation, now and in the future. What are the signs to watch out for and how to act proactively in one's own interests and that of society in general - two not mutually exclusive factors – and not be goaded into subservient roles. Let's face it, a large number of so-called "jobs" these days represent no more than modern day slavery, but without the

potential benefit of future manumission.

Education of the right type will not provide all the answers, and a safety net will clearly be needed to protect the vulnerable who are unable to benefit from it for. Nevertheless it will go a very long way.

Now let's talk about *status quo*. No, not the group! I refer to the rooted inertia and self-interest in maintaining situations exactly as they are with little real change, only tinkering with the superficialities. You know... the usual thing that happens when something radically new is proposed.

There are lots of entrenched vested interests in the poverty industry, and the homelessness industry in particular: ranging from those within governmental departments, the many established charities, and even business-endowed philanthropic organisations. These can all be classified as coming under the general umbrella of what can, and is, called the “Do Good” society. “Do gooders” like to... well... “do good”. But they themselves are in reality often the main beneficiary of their activities. Either, in the most benign sense, through obtaining the self-satisfaction of “helping others”, whether or not any genuine benefit passes to the intended recipients. Or, more venally, in the case of big business, for the various public, investor relations, and tax benefits that their apparently selfless altruistic acts can engender.

When setting up “Outcast Foundation” recently, vested interests in maintaining the status quo were certainly found to be alive and well, with a total absence of support from existing charities and concerned businesses, all of whom having potentially something to lose (at least when viewed from their own short-term viewpoints). Indeed, in many cases, the reaction was overtly obstructive.

Do not the poor of our society deserve better than this? And in these uncertain political and economic times, with Brexit on the horizon and a major global financial meltdown looking increasingly inevitable, wouldn't it be wonderful if the United Kingdom could once again lead the way in doing something meaningful, of international significance, and indeed truly impressive? That is to say, through seriously addressing the issue of poverty by a government-driven, genuine and effective initiative dealing with root causes and once and for all, except in the most extreme cases, doing away with sticking-plasters.

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