Troubled Families Or Just Broke in Britain?

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The 'Troubled Families' programme launched by the Communities Secretary Eric Pickles on 11th June 2012 is the latest attempt to respond to a persistent question, 'Why do people become disconnected from mainstream society?' **'Troubled Families' (http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/newsroom/2052313)** identifies 120,000 'troubled families' whom Eric Pickles argues are, '... ruining their own lives... their children's lives, and the lives of their neighbours.' **David Cameron, speaking in Birmingham in December 2011 (http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/troubled-families-speech/)** suggested that **'Troubled Families' (http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/2117840.pdf)** aims to stimulate a 'revolution in responsibility' in order to 'heal the scars of a broken society'. The Prime Minister tellingly summarised what he perceived to be the problem, 'kids leaving sink schools without qualifications... parents never getting a job and choosing to live on the dole... teenagers rampaging around the neighbourhood before turning to crime'. So what is a **'troubled family' (http://www.lgcplus.com/troubled-family-the-definition-in-practice/5043195.article)**? The Programme handbook identifies a 'troubled family' as one which is 'involved in crime and anti-social behaviour; has children not in school; an adult on out-of-work benefits; causes high costs to the public purse'. The scheme will commit £448,000,000 and a 'Family Worker' to 'turn around' the lives of 'troubled families' in **key measurable areas (http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/newsroom/2158689)** (education, anti-social behaviour, youth offending and unemployment).

A glance through the list of numbers of **'troubled families' in different local councils (http://blogs.birminghampost.net/news/2011/12/how-many-troubled-families-liv.html)** makes it clear that the greatest concentration of 'troubled families' is found in the poorest areas of the country. Whilst reductionist correlations between economic poverty and 'troubled families' strip people of their agency, the lack of any serious analysis of structural social exclusion raises significant question marks over the likely success of the 'troubled families' initiative. In a 2012 report entitled, **'There may be trouble ahead' (http://www.poverty.ac.uk/sites/default/files/trouble_ahead.pdf)** the sociologist Ruth Levitas pithily notes, 'No mention of ill-health, poverty, poor housing... Cameron blames the imputed condition of such families on state failure... excessive benefits... and a weak criminal justice system'.

It is unwise to infer the motivation behind this initiative. It might be a serious attempt to tackle a serious social problem or a means of cutting welfare spending – we do not know. However 'Troubled Families' is on shaky ground for several reasons. First, it ignores the contexts within which most 'troubled families' live, focusing instead on behaviour and the family unit alone as if these are not deeply influenced by structures of inequality. Second, 'troubled families' are implicitly judged on a moral basis which takes little account of the alienation that can result from ongoing social exclusion. Third, the programme stigmatises poor communities.

An example drawn from my own research alongside unemployed young men over the last two years illustrates this point... The Bromford estate in Birmingham is amongst the 2% most multiply deprived neighbourhoods in England, and currently the second highest unemployment figures in the country. Life expectancy is lower than that for almost every other part of Birmingham and more people die young than elsewhere in the city. Two-thirds of families have no access to a car, making travel to decent food shops and work in the city's gleaming Bullring a real problem. Many of the young men I work alongside are 'N.E.E.T' (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). And yet some have started their own recording studio, begun forging a music career, are training to be youth workers (with the help of the Worth Unlimited youth organisation), established a social enterprise fixing and selling broken bicycles or are studying for A-Levels with a view to applying to study at the University of Birmingham. Most wear 'hoodies' but all resist the 'broken Britain' stereotype. They know that their community is depicted as 'the slum'. However, they resist the demonising of their neighbourhood and their depiction as inarticulate 'Chavs'. The recent **'Bromford Dreams' graffiti art project (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/ptr/departments/theologyandreligion/research/projects/social-exclusion.aspx)**, which I developed as part of my work as a Research Fellow in Urban Theology at the University of Birmingham, bursts the myth that apparently undergirds the 'troubled families' programme. During February 2012 these young men explored the impact that social exclusion has on the way they think about identity, meaning, truth and the future. Working together they designed and painted the articulate and provocative 'Bromford Dreams' cube which is now on display at the centre of the green campus of the University of Birmingham and has formed the basis for a conference and concert. The 'Bromford Dreams' project perhaps needs to be studied by the authors of 'Troubled Families' programme for it subverts the stigmatising stereotypes that the initiative falls prey to and appears to perpetuate.

Dr Chris Shannahan
Research Fellow in Urban Theology
University of Birmingham

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