

## Not the last word: point and counterpoint

# The stretch limos are longer and cheaper but those in poverty are still with us

Chris Goddard

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*Social workers and other welfare workers daily work with many people who live in poverty. Sadly, little of what they see and hear reaches the broader population. A recent book, by Nick Davies, extends the tradition of what we now call investigative journalism. Davies meets some children who are selling their bodies on the streets of Nottingham, listens to their stories, and embarks on a journey of exploration into a world of child prostitution, drugs and housing estates full of despair. The early stages of the current election campaign in Australia suggest that there is little cause for optimism for the most disadvantaged.*

As I write this, there is speculation that the next Federal election is only a few weeks away. Apparently it will be fought on tax. The papers have been full of charts showing who will gain most from the respective tax packages. The family with two incomes earning \$60,000, the family with one income of \$30,000, the couple with no children, the single parent with two children, and so on. I am always missing from such a mathematical approach. I have too many children to feature in these forecasts.

There is another more important group who are missing out in these projections. Those with no jobs, no matter how many children they have, are rarely mentioned whether there is to be a GST or not. Little is written about those who are unemployed because this election appears to be focused entirely on those who pay tax. You need to receive a certain level of income in order to be liable to pay tax. Those voters who suffer long-term unemployment, those voters in poverty, rarely figure in the discussion.

This is a strange and unwelcome situation to be in. A significant proportion of the electorate, and their dependents, appear to form a passive and disenfranchised group in the forthcoming election. There has even been heated discussion about the price of luxury cars and environmentally hazardous four-wheel drives, but very little attention has been paid to those who pay no tax, and who are unlikely ever to purchase an expensive new car.

The first book I read about poverty was George Orwell's (1937) *The Road To Wigan Pier*. I must have read Charles Dickens (*Hard Times*, for example) before this, but Orwell's *The Road To Wigan Pier* is the text that had the greatest influence. It was not that Dickens' descriptions were any less graphic but I was impressed by Orwell's determination to go out and discover how one disadvantaged section of society survived.

Part of Orwell's journey took him to stay at the Brookers' lodging house and tripe shop where he shared a bedroom with three others. The bedroom was a barely converted sitting room with 'four squalid beds' squashed amongst the wrecked furniture (1937:5). Orwell's bed was so small, and crammed in amongst the other beds and furniture, that he had to sleep doubled up to avoid kicking the man who was similarly squashed into another bed at the bottom of his.

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Such hardships made little impression on me as an adolescent. Most adolescents can, if necessary, sleep in most places. What really depressed me about the Brookers' lodging house was the squalor. Mrs Brooker, the landlady swathed in grubby blankets, had taken up permanent residence on a large sofa that blocked access to the tripe store. It was Mr Brooker's grimy hands that stayed with me for most of the book:

Mr Brooker was... astonishingly dirty. I don't think I ever once saw his hands clean. As Mrs Brooker was now an invalid he prepared most of the food, and like all people with permanently dirty hands he had a peculiarly intimate, lingering manner of handling things. If he gave you a slice of bread-and-butter there was always a black thumb-print on it. (Orwell 1937:8)

Mr Brooker was not a happy man. Orwell's description of him brought him and the squalor unpleasantly to life:

It was Mr Brooker who attended to the shop, gave the lodgers their food and 'did out' the bedrooms. He was always moving with incredible slowness from one hated job to another. Often the beds were still unmade at six in the evening, and at any hour of the day you were liable to meet Mr Brooker on the stairs, carrying a full chamber-pot which he gripped with his thumb well over the rim. (1937:12)

Mr Brooker hated his life and collected as many grievances as there were dead flies in the shop window.

The meals at the Brookers' house were uniformly disgusting. For breakfast you got two rashers of bacon and a pale fried egg, and bread-and-butter which had often been cut overnight and always had thumb-marks on it. However tactfully I tried, I could never induce Mr Brooker to let me cut my own bread-and-butter, he would hand it to me slice by slice, each slice gripped firmly under that broad black thumb. (1937:15)

The overflowing chamber pot underneath the breakfast table one morning was the final straw for Orwell and he left for pastures cleaner if not greener.

Orwell was staying at the Brookers' lodging house in order to investigate the lot of the coal miner. Orwell went down the mines with the miners and discovered what he thought to be hell:

Most of the things one imagines in hell are there – heat, noise, confusion, darkness, foul air, and, above all, unbearably cramped space. Everything except the fire, for there is no fire down there except the feeble beams of Davy lamps and electric torches which scarcely penetrate the clouds of coal dust. (1937:21-22)

Travelling to the coal face, Orwell discovered, was dangerous, painful and uncomfortable. Descending in a lift cage that travels 'at the speed of an express train' (1937:47) was but part of the journey. There are also vast distances to travel horizontally and these horizontal journeys (often of several miles) have to be made in great discomfort:

At the start to walk stooping is rather a joke, but it is a joke that soon wears off... when the roof falls to four feet or less it is a tough job for anybody except a dwarf or a child. You have not only got to bend double, you have also got to keep your head up all the while so as to see the beams and girders and dodge them

when they come... After half a mile it becomes (I am not exaggerating) unbearable agony... your pace grows slower and slower. You come to a stretch of a couple of hundred yards where it is all exceptionally low and you have to work yourself along in a squatting position. (1937:26-27)

The squalor of the Brookers' lodgings and the awful danger, physical discomfort and indignity of the miners' conditions made a great impression on me. What also impressed me, perhaps even more, was Orwell's determination to discover as best he could, the reality of this other world and the lives of those forced to inhabit it.

I took other messages away from Orwell's *The Road To Wigan Pier*. In Wigan, he stayed with a miner suffering from nystagmus (the involuntary flickering movement of the eyes when looking sideways). The indignities attached to this man's pension are described powerfully by Orwell:

He had to go to the colliery once a week at a time named by the company, and when he got there he was kept waiting about for hours in the cold wind... This business of petty inconvenience and indignity, of being kept waiting about, of having to do everything at other people's convenience, is inherent in working-class life. A thousand influences constantly press a working man down into a *passive* role. He does not act, he is acted upon. (1937:48-49)

At the end of Part One, Orwell recognises that he has described only a brief moment in time. In his depiction of a working class home, where the father has steady work and a decent wage, he finds a 'perfect symmetry' that we can dismiss for its old-fashioned, gender-specific roles. In two centuries he wrote that all this will have changed:

Skip forward two hundred years into the Utopian future, and the scene is totally different. Hardly one of the things I have imagined will still be there... a world where there is no poverty... (1937:149-150)

There are far fewer coal miners in the UK now. Poverty and exploitation have not disappeared, however. Nick Davies (1998), an investigative journalist on *The Guardian*, has made a somewhat similar journey to that travelled by Orwell. Sixty years later, he has explored a different Britain in a book entitled *Dark Heart*. Before even starting this work, the back of the cover seizes one's attention. The glowing reviews cited come from the right and left of British politics.

Davies's book opens in Nottingham where he discovered 'The children in the Forest.' Two small boys (Jamie and Luke, barely twelve years old) introduced Davies to the world of child prostitution. Later he was introduced to Lisa, another child selling herself on the streets. These children told their stories to Davies and set him on a journey into a part of the country most people choose not to see.

Luke's story, sadly, is one that can be found in countless case files in Australia as well as in the UK. Luke's father died when he was six years old, his mother could not cope, and by the time he was seven Luke was in care. Separated from his brothers and sister, Luke was placed with foster parents, then more foster parents, and then in a children's home. By the time he was nine, he had sex and experimented with drugs.

Soon he was selling himself on the streets (Davies 1998:8-10).

Lisa, aged 14 years when Davies met her, had been on the streets for three years:

... with the same matter-of-fact detachment that coloured the pictures painted by the two boys, she attempted to sum up her experience. (Davies 1998:12)

At the age of ten, her parents split up and Lisa went into care. Bullied in the children's home, she ran away to cities all over the country before, inevitably perhaps, she was introduced to 'the game':

'What's the game?' Lisa asked. The woman said, 'You know, sell your body like.' Lisa didn't know, but the woman soon explained... (Davies 1998:13)

Davies acknowledges that the problem he is describing is not new, but argues (and most welfare workers in Australia would concur) that the scale of the problem is now different. Davies talked to police and social workers as well as the young people themselves. A senior social worker is quoted at length:

... the nature of the young people we are dealing with in care has changed. We have tremendous problems of management with them. What we find is that our community homes contain a combination of the most damaged, deprived, depraved and delinquent children and they are incredibly difficult to work with... We pick up these young people when a lot of this damage has been done to them. (Davies 1998:31)

Davies asks if this is the key:

They are all the same these children, they never show a thing – because they have learned never to feel a thing. If someone lands them with a bruise, they just hide it or cover it with make-up. If someone lands them with any other kind of pain, they just shrug it away. They are totally split off from ordinary people, sharing with each other their own peculiar hollowness, all of them different together. (Davies 1998:32)

Davies travels through rotting housing estates, drug houses and brothels to paint a picture that is depressing but very familiar to many who work in welfare. Not all will agree with his analysis:

The true scale of poverty may be hidden from the rest of Britain by the simple fact of the prosperity of the majority. The true damage inflicted by poverty is hidden by something more deliberate... there are social workers and doctors and local politicians who know very well that among some of the very poor white communities, there is something like an epidemic of child abuse – physical, emotional and sexual. But, with a few brave exceptions, they are most reluctant to admit it, for fear of giving the poor a bad image. (Davies 1998:235)

Davies vigorously argues that the worlds he has explored were not created by accident:

Looking back into the history of the country of the poor, it turns out that it was created quite deliberately, rather like the great penal colony of Australia was planned and created by politicians two centuries earlier. This poverty was produced for a purpose. (Davies 1998:285-286)

He describes the shift in values in Britain in the 1980s. The debate shifted away from how to ensure equality of opportunity to how to reward enterprise, away from how to maintain the welfare state to where the cuts should be made. In the UK the top tax rate was cut from 83 per cent to 40 per cent to ensure that the wealthy received more. At the same time, workers received less with the 'working poor' tripling in number in less than 15 years. For decades the unemployment rate never rose above three per cent, but now rates above eight per cent were acceptable in order to maintain a pool of available labour and to restrain inflation. At the same time:

... just as low pay was becoming lower, just as jobs were becoming rarer, the government started to strip away the safety nets which for decades had ensured that the poor could not fall too far. (Davies 1998:289)

Davies lists the assaults on the welfare state: the removal of benefits from young people; thirty changes to the definition of unemployment; real cuts to social security benefits; and cuts to public housing. Mrs Thatcher's cuts to the welfare state produced a total saving of £12 billion (over A\$30 billion). Most of those savings provided the tax cuts for the affluent.

Davies writes of the spiritual damage that is done to people in such circumstances. He asks how this dark heart was allowed to grow in a tolerant society:

The answer is that many of the affluent, too, have come to look upon the poor as mere objects. If the poor have been encouraged by circumstance to treat each other as objects, it is a lesson they have learned from mainstream society. (Davies 1998:299)

Davies's final paragraph should be echoing around Australia during the election:

There is no crusade against poverty in Britain. No leading politician demands full employment for the country's workforce. No prominent public figure insists that the wealth which was taken from the poor and given to the rich... should now be returned. There is only the immense jabber of the powerful who are surrounded by the victims of their affluence and who yet continue to know nothing of the undiscovered country of the poor. (Davies 1998:305)

Davies uses quotes from William Booth and Henry Mayhew, but not Orwell, to set his journey in an historical context. It had been years since I read their works and Davies's journey prompted me to return to their explorations. Mayhew's work was published in an English newspaper, the *Morning Chronicle* 150 years ago. Mayhew (1849/50) set out to:

... enlist in behalf of the sufferers the sympathies at least of all those who desire to see justice prevail ... (1973 ed: 576)

The articles by Mayhew were criticised by *The Economist* for 'encouraging a reliance on public sympathy for help instead of on self-exertion' and for casting 'a slur on commercial greatness' (1849; cited in Thompson and Yeo 1973). Booth, no doubt, also suffered similar criticisms. The language might have changed but the central ideas of Booth (and Mayhew) are still valid. Booth argued, for example, that 'The interests of each class are bound up with those of every other class' (1892:239).

