

The Underclass

John Hyde

When we homogenise the poor, by treating alike all people who don't have much money, we don't give battlers their due.

The Association of Civilian Widows wants the Federal Government to reintroduce the distinction between Widows and other welfare beneficiaries. A Widows' B Pension was paid to women over 45 who had lost their spouse/partner but who were not now supporting children: this is being phased out so that women who join this category will qualify only for sickness and unemployment benefits. And a Widows' A Pension was paid to women who had lost their spouse/partner and who were supporting children: these women now qualify for the sole parents' pension. The Association argues that the changes reduce the status of widows and their children in the eyes of the community.

Without knowing more about its administrative difficulties and costs than I do, I am not prepared to say that the Government is wrong to phase out the Widows' Pension. For macro-economic reasons government expenditure must be cut. If it is not cut, there is the risk of economic hardship of an order that I doubt the Civilian Widows have contemplated. Their argument about status, nevertheless, has point to it.

Charles Murray, a Fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, and author of the path-breaking "Losing Ground", argues that there are now, and always have been, two classes of people without much money: ordinary folk and 'the underclass'---in Australian parlance, 'the battlers' and 'the shiftless'. The underclass are distinguishable not just by low incomes, but also by the untidy state of their houses, their inability to hold jobs, bad manners, poor schooling, drugs, alcohol, crime and ex-nuptial births. 'Underclass' refers not to a degree of poverty but to a type of poverty.

Battlers, doing their best under difficult circumstances, struggle to distinguish themselves from the underclass---for instance, their kids might not be well-clothed, but they start the day clean and are taught to be civil. With reason, the class line between battler and shiftless was once as rigidly drawn as battler parents could draw it. But in the 1960s the distinction was softened. Social theorists developed a new way

of looking at the poor. The poor were, as Charles Murray put it, 'homogenised'. They were all victims of circumstance and only needed to be given a fair shake in order to succeed.

There are many differences between the two countries, but in this debate the relevant differences between North America and Australia are trivial. The change in attitudes that has taken place in both countries is, however, fundamental---with momentous consequences.

One of those consequences is the rise in illegitimacy. In the late 1950s, 4.5% of Australian births were 'ex-nuptial'. By 1988 this had risen to 19%. Murray studied illegitimacy in the United States and the United Kingdom. In spite of a few apparent exceptions, being without two parents is a problem for a child, however it comes about. But, in the US and UK at least, children are far more likely to be born into the underclass if their parents have never married than if they divorce.

One defining characteristic of the underclass is welfare dependency. In the US, half of all single parents (the 28% never-married plus the divorced and the widowed) are off welfare within two years. That's not too bad, but the average period of welfare dependency for the never-married sub-group is 9.3 years. Murray wryly comments that what the people in Harlem and The Bronx had known for years was finally discovered by social science: long-term welfare dependency among young women who have children without husbands is a fact, not a myth.

In Britain nearly half of all illegitimate births are jointly registered by parents giving the same address but, even in these cases, is it sensible to assume a relationship that is as stable as a marriage? What is the attitude to the child of parents who think that marriage is not essential to siring and giving birth? Do they, without the contract, intend to stick to each other and the child through thick and thin until it is an adult? Or do they believe that male role models are unimportant---that little boys grow naturally into responsible fathers and husbands, going to work, refraining from crime and not siring more children to be born into similar circumstances?

Murray's evidence is that, without the example of responsible adults. Rather, children do not themselves grow into responsible adults---they tend to join the underclass.

Whole communities of the underclass, where illegitimacy, crime and joblessness are normal, have grown up in the United States and Britain. These are pure Hell for the battlers who live within them. Murray tells a tragic story of a family in Birkenhead whose daughter was embarrassed that she seemed to be the only child who had a father. Her parents eventually took the decision to bring their younger children up to be aggressive and less civil than the first child, so that they might avoid the punishment of neighbourhood children who ran wild.

Murray says, "The key to an underclass is...a situation in which a large proportion of an entire community lacks fathers and this is far more common in poor communities than in rich ones". These facts are readily observable, and it is, therefore, easy to understand why the Civilian Widows wished to maintain every possible distinction between themselves and other single parents. That is no more than battlers have been doing for generations.

In 1912 George Bernard Shaw, who I think is still an idol of the left, made one of his principal characters, Henry Doolittle, admit to being a member of the undeserving poor. It seems that in 1912 only some poor were deserving. Whatever happened to the Left between now and then? The Left was always impractical, and most of its theory was developed by men---Rousseau and Marx in particular---who did not themselves respect the human decencies. Nevertheless, socialists once championed those people who did. They championed battlers, distinguishing them from those whom Murray calls the underclass.

The distinction is still necessary.

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