Underclass + 10

Underclass + 10

Charles Murray and the British Underclass 1990 - 2000

Charles Murray

Commentary by
Melanie Phillips

CIVITAS: Institute for the Study of Civil Society
in association with *The Sunday Times*
London

First published February 2001

email: books@civitas.org.uk

ISBN 1-903 386-10-1

Typeset by CIVITAS
in New Century Schoolbook

Printed in Great Britain by
The Cromwell Press
Trowbridge, Wiltshire

Contents

The Authors

Charles Murray is the author of *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980*, 1984; *In Pursuit of Happiness and Good Government*, 1988; *The Emerging British Underclass*, 1990; with Richard Herrnstein, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, 1994; and *What It Means To Be A Libertarian*, 1997. He is the Bradley Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a public policy research institute in Washington, DC.

Melanie Phillips is a columnist for the *Sunday Times* who writes about social issues and political culture. She is the author of *Divided House*, a study of women at Westminster, and co-author with Dr John Dawson of *Doctors' Dilemmas*, a primer on medical ethics. Her controversial book *All Must Have Prizes* (Little, Brown) charted the disastrous effects of our culture of individualism upon the education system and the moral order. Her latest book, *The Sex-Change Society: Feminised Britain and the Neutered Male* (Social Market Foundation) argues that feminism has distorted its own agenda of equality by replacing it with sameness.

Foreword

In 1989 the *Sunday Times* brought Charles Murray to Britain to investigate whether Britain had an 'underclass'. In his article, subsequently published in book form as *The Emerging British Underclass*, Murray described himself as a visitor from a plague area who had come to see whether the disease was spreading. In 1993 he returned to check on its progress, and the resulting article, also for the *Sunday Times*, was published as *Underclass: The Crisis Deepens*. Both titles were published with commentaries by critics of Murray's thesis.

In the early part of 2000 the *Sunday Times* published a further update, allowing Murray to look back over ten years of the underclass debate in Britain. It is re-printed here with a commentary by *Sunday Times* columnist Melanie Phillips, whose books *All Must Have Prizes* and *The Sex-Change Society* have established her as a leading commentator on social and cultural trends.

We are very grateful to John Witherow, the Editor of the *Sunday Times*, for generously allowing us to reproduce Charles Murray's essay.

David G. Green

Acknowledgement

Cover graphic supplied by the *Sunday Times*.

Underclass + 10

Charles Murray

As the 1980s came to an end, the *Sunday Times* asked me to come to Britain and look at your social problems through the eyes of an American who had been writing about the American underclass. The questions: Does Britain have an underclass? If so, big or small? Stable, shrinking, or growing?

When I wrote in the *Magazine* that Britain did indeed have an underclass, small but growing, the news had no natural constituency. Conservative politicians were embarrassed that crime, unemployment, and illegitimacy had soared conspicuously on their watch, and would just as soon have ignored the whole thing. The Left, ordinarily delighted to blame anything on Margaret Thatcher, couldn't admit that crime really was rising and large numbers of people were exploiting the dole without sounding like lower-case conservatives. As for unmarried women having babies, it was a good sign, not a bad one, that

> ***'...the notion of a British underclass was generally dismissed as an attempt to impose an American paradigm on British problems that weren't really so terrible anyway'***

women were no longer forced into marriage just because they got pregnant. From Left and Right alike, the notion of a British underclass was generally dismissed as an attempt to impose an American paradigm on British problems that weren't really so terrible anyway.

Ten years on, the Britain I had written about in 1989 was a much different place. In 1989, Britain was in the beginnings of recovery after wrenching economic dislocations earlier in the decade; in 1999, Britain was six years into an economic expansion. In 1989, a dominant Tory was at 10 Downing Street and the Labour party was in a shambles; in 1999, that had changed to a dominant Labourite and a Conservative party in a shambles. And what had been a nascent underclass in 1989 had by 1999 become one that increasingly resembled, in behaviour and proportional size, the underclass that we have learned to live with in America.

Before I make that case, let us be clear on terminology. By underclass, I do not mean people who are merely poor, but people at the margins of society, unsocialised and often violent. The chronic criminal is part of the underclass, especially the violent chronic criminal. But so are parents who mean well but who cannot provide for themselves, who give nothing back to the neighbourhood, and whose children are the despair of the teachers who have to deal with them.

In real life, people seldom fall into neat categories. The dole came into being because many hardworking people were down on their luck and needed a few months of tiding-over. It still serves that purpose for

some people, and they bear no resemblance to the underclass. For that matter, the criminal can be a loyal friend to those he chooses not to assault and rob. The single mother whose children are out of control may be the backbone of her neighbourhood in other ways.

But the complexities of individuals do not trump statistical tendencies. My fundamental thesis is that large increases in the three indicators I used in 1989—drop-out from the labour force among young males, violent crime, and births to unmarried women—will be associated with the growth of a class of violent, unsocialised people who, if they become sufficiently numerous, will fundamentally degrade the life of society. Where did Britain stand by 1999?

'By underclass, I do not mean people who are merely poor, but people at the margins of society, unsocialised and often violent'

Drop-out from the labour force among young adult males is an important indicator that an underclass has formed because it reflects such a clear departure from the age-old norm that young adult males work regularly and work hard—supporting wives and children, siblings or parents, or, at the very least, supporting themselves. But the simple statistic for tracking changes in that norm, the percentage of young men who are not employed, is laden with ambiguities. Young men who are listed as not in employment can be in school, trying unsuccessfully to find a job, idle on the dole, officially on the dole but actually holding a job, or active in the criminal

economy. To complicate matters further, changes in the overall health of the economy can mask underlying changes in the propensity to work.

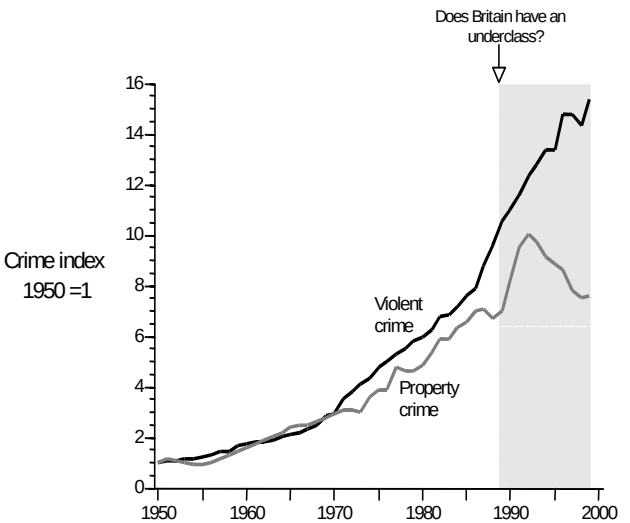
The short story is that the percentage of young working-aged males not in employment was dramatically higher in 1999 than it had been in 1989. Among males aged 18-24, the percentage not in employment shot up from 20.5 per cent in 1989 to 31.2 per cent in 1999, an increase of more than half. Judging from the more detailed age breakdowns available through 1997, drop-out from the labour force was largest in the age group that has the fewest excuses for not working, those aged 20-24.

There is no obvious benign explanation for these large increases in young males out of employment. A worsening economy is not to blame—the overall national unemployment rate was lower in 1999 than in 1989. The percentage of men aged 18-24 in school did not change appreciably—the increases in people in higher education since 1989 have been concentrated among young women and among people of both sexes aged 30 and older. Since 1994, the number of men in their twenties who are in higher education has actually been falling. What has been happening? The trend conforms exactly to what one would expect from a growing underclass, but it requires a full-blown analysis by geographic region and condition of prior employment before the numbers can be fully understood. At the very least, the magnitude of the raw increase demands attention.

The storyline for violent crime is more transparent. Figure 1 shows the trend lines for violent crime and property crime since 1950. The shaded area highlights the change in the ten years since my 1989

assessment of the situation. (Note that in 1999 the Home Office introduced a new method of counting offences that substantially increases the apparent crime rate. Everything that follows is based on the old counting rules.)

Figure 1



Source: Home Office statistics for England and Wales. Trend lines are based on notifiable offences per 100,000 people.

In 1989, I observed that a sure way for an American visitor to provoke scornful disbelief was to say that Britain had a higher rate of property crime than the United States. That is now old news—even after the drop in property crime since 1993, Britain's property crime rate remains close to twice as great (contem-

plate that for a moment: *twice* as great) as America's. The new news is that in 1996 Britain took the lead from America in violent crime as well—to put it technically, the sum of offences categorised as violence against the person, sexual offences, and robbery, expressed as offences per 100,000 people, outstripped the index for comparable offences in the United States and has remained higher since then. We can argue about the exact percentages in the British-US comparisons, because the definitions of offences in the two countries are not exactly parallel. But the basic patterns I describe are not subject to debate. Robbery is still somewhat higher in America than in Britain and homicide is still much higher. But, dramatic as homicide and robbery are, they are numerically a small part of the crime problem. Crime overall, both violent and property, is higher in Britain than in America.

I emphasise the comparison to drive home a historical point. From the mid-nineteenth century through the first three-quarters of this century, the United States was seen as a violent, unruly society with a lot of personal freedom but not very civilised. During the same period, Britain was seen, rightly, as the most civilised country on earth. Other countries on the continent had low crime rates, but they also had traditions and institutions of authoritarian control. Britain enjoyed extraordinarily low crime *and* extraordinary freedom. It was a unique, magnificent achievement, proving to the world that liberty and safety are compatible; proving, indeed, that a genuinely civil society is possible. No longer. Britain is just another high-crime industrialised country.

The contrast between the trend lines for property and violent crime is instructive. Why should property crime have gone down while violent crime has continued to rise? Conventional wisdom notwithstanding, better economic times do not account for much if any of the drop in property crime—the statistical relationship between unemployment and crime is weak. Part of the answer is that property crime lends itself to technical solutions. Compare the anti-theft devices on today's automobiles with those of 1989. Contemplate the presence of high-tech security systems in stores and homes in the better parts of town compared to their presence in 1989. For that matter, many readers can document these changes simply by looking at changes in their own protections against property crime since 1989. At the outset of the rise in crime, Britain was a very easy place to steal things. Now it is much harder.

'Britain's property crime rate remains close to twice as great... as America's'

Another part of the answer may lie in the increased use of prison. From 1950 until 1993, British crime became much less risky—a point that I have previously made at length in *Does Prison Work?*.[1] Britain might have had a low crime rate and unobtrusive police in the first half of the century, but your chances of getting caught if you did commit a crime were high, and the chances of going to prison if you were caught were high. The risk of imprisonment began to fall starting in the mid-1950s, and, after a few years' lag time, crime began to rise. The risk continued to fall and crime began to rise faster. Since

1993, the risk of imprisonment has been rising and property crime has been falling. Conceivably, a causal relationship is at work here.

Violent crime is different from property crime in several respects. It is different first in its location. Property crime occurs in affluent neighbourhoods as well as poor ones. Not equally—poor neighbourhoods suffer more than rich ones from all kinds of crime—but affluent neighbourhoods are where the best things to steal are, attracting rational burglars and car thieves and shoplifters. In contrast, most violent crime consists of assaults, and assaults don't happen very often in rural areas or in the quiet precincts of the affluent.

Why should violent crime increase so specifically in low-income neighbourhoods, and continue to increase even as property crime has declined? It is not because poor people are inherently violent. In 1900, Britain had many times the number of poor people it has now, and a fraction of the violent crime rate. It is not because of proletarian rage against income inequality. The rich of 1900 had lives much more conspicuously different from the rest of society than the rich of 1999. On every dimension of economic and political division, Britain and used to be a much more riven society than it is now. It was united in one crucial respect: a universally shared consensus of what constituted moral standards and civilised behaviour. And Britain used to have hardly any crime at all.

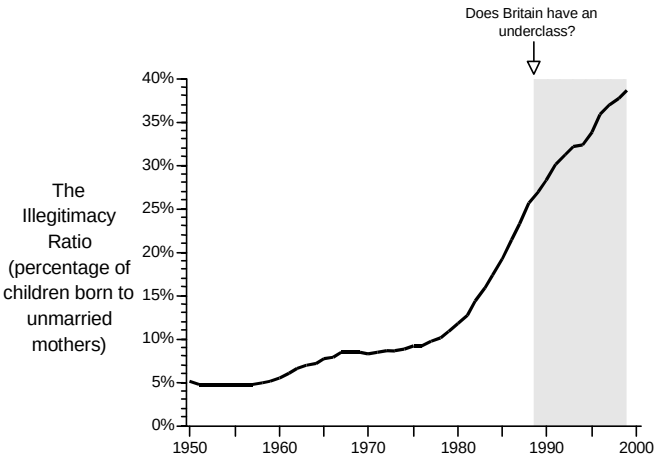
Violent crime also differs from property crime in the degree of rationality that goes into it. Thievery is often approached in a businesslike way, and because

of that is most susceptible to a deterrent effect. Increase the price of stealing by increasing the risk and severity of punishment, and some people will decide, rationally, that the game is no longer worth the candle. Deterrence is much less likely when a person is acting out of impulse. Impulsive behaviour, part of a general lack of socialisation, is a hallmark of the underclass. Most violent crime is of just that sort. Modest increases in the risk of imprisonment are irrelevant. The value of imprisonment for violent people is incapacitation, not deterrence. Prison gets them off the street.

'Over the last two decades, larger and larger numbers of British children have not been socialised to norms of self-control, consideration for others, and the concept that actions have consequences'

The link between the rise in violent crime and my arguments about the nature of the underclass is direct. Over the last two decades, larger and larger numbers of British children have not been socialised to norms of self-control, consideration for others, and the concept that actions have consequences. One of the leading reasons that they have not been so socialised is that larger and larger numbers of British children are not being raised by two mature, married adults. It is as simple as that, and as intractable, which brings us to the last and most important of the indicators of an underclass, births to unmarried women. The story of the illegitimacy ratio—the percentage of children born out of wedlock—is shown in the nearby Figure 2 (p. 10).

Figure 2



Source: Office of Population Censuses and Surveys. Figure for 1999 is based on births through March.

In 1969, not really ancient history, only one out of 12 children in England and Wales was born to an unmarried mother. In 1979, one out of nine. In 1989, one out of four. In 1999, more than one out of three and approaching one out of two-and-a-half.

Does it make any difference? After all, Home Secretary Jack Straw assured us last summer that: 'We shouldn't get in a paddy about the decline of formal marriage'. Other kinds of families, he said, 'can do just as well for their children'.[2] This statement is true in the trivial sense that there are single mothers, cohabiting couples, and step-families who bring up wonderful children. But many readers of the Home Secretary's words probably understood him to mean that *on average* the children of these non-

traditional families do just as well as the children of two formally married biological parents. That inference is factually, unequivocally wrong. There may still be a lot of rhetorical debate on this issue, but not any debate grounded in a fair appraisal of the data. No alternative family structure comes close to the merits of two parents, formally married.

'No alternative family structure comes close to the merits of two parents, formally married'

In 1989, when the technical literature on this topic was just emerging, the balance of scholarly opinion in the United States had already shifted, but there was still at least some room for argument. By the time of a follow-up article on the underclass that I wrote for the *Sunday Times* in 1994, that literature had become so extensive that the remaining scholarly debate in the US had turned to 'how much' rather than 'whether' the two-parent family was better for children. It made no difference whether a scholar was trying to predict a child's criminality, school grades, income as an adult, or psychological well-being; it made no difference how carefully the analysis controlled for the family's socioeconomic status. Taken as groups, the children of two married biological parents were found to do much better than the children of single parents, and the children of divorced mothers were found to do much better than the children of never-married mothers.

Two important new findings have emerged since that 1994 follow-up article. First, it has been found that step-fathers are no solution to the problems

associated with single parenthood. There is very little difference between the outcomes for children of divorced women and the children of women who remarry. Second, after many years in which the growing problem of child abuse by males was assumed to involve mostly fathers in traditional families, analysts finally began to ask who these men are. It turns out that the most serious forms of child abuse are rarely committed by a married biological father, but are inflicted instead by a cohabiting boyfriend or step-father.

I should add that there is no reason to think that these latest findings from America will have much effect on the rhetoric in Britain. The idea that children do just as well in single-parent families seems to have become a kind of unshakeable folk legend for British politicians and intellectuals.

Young males are dropping out of the labour market, violent crime has risen drastically, the illegitimacy ratio is at 38 per cent and climbing. Trends that in 1989 couldn't possibly continue for another ten years have continued for another ten years. But so what? Trying to get people's attention about the underclass these days makes me identify with Jeremiah. The economy is humming, stock portfolios are bulging, and, many readers may ask, if this growing underclass is as big a problem as Murray says it is, why has British life changed so little?

Whether one can ask this question depends upon where one lives. Earlier, I mentioned that violent crime is still rare in rural areas and affluent neighbourhoods. There are still many islands in Britain where life goes on much as it did before. It just so

happens that affluent neighbourhoods and picturesque rural retreats are where the people who run Britain tend to spend their time. The élites can afford to take a tolerant view of the increase in the violent crime index. It seldom affects them directly. The same applies to the breakdown of the family. Taking Britain as a whole, nearly 40 per cent of births are out of wedlock. But, as I discussed at length in my earlier underclass articles, illegitimacy is overwhelmingly a lower-class phenomenon, despite the publicity given to pregnant unmarried celebrities. What this means statistically is that, as of the year 2000, perhaps ten or 15 per cent of births among the professional classes are out of wedlock, while that figure is likely to be well over 50 per cent among the unskilled and unemployed. Similar comments could be made about the effects of divorce—in affluent neighbourhoods, divorces are not only fewer than in low-income neighbourhoods, but many of them occur after the children are grown.

'...the problems of the underclass are driven by the breakdown in socialisation of the young, which in turn is driven by the breakdown of the family'

In those differences lies the explanation for the myopia of élites about the effects of the breakdown of the family. They are living in a world where, in fact, the family still has *not* broken down. Families with small children by no means function the same as they did 30 years ago, but there are only scattered signs of real disaster in the making. For disaster, you have to visit the unfashionable part of town.

In my 1994 follow-up article, I laid out two scenarios for the rest of the century. In one of them, labelled 'Brave New World', the breakdown of the family in the lower classes would spread rapidly throughout society. The other scenario, which I considered more likely, was labelled 'the New Victorians and the New Rabble'. It hypothesised that the traditional family structure would remain strong, perhaps even strengthen, in the upper half of British society, so that, by 2000, the gap between the behaviour of the upper and the lower classes would become even wider. I cannot tell you today which of those scenarios is statistically closer to the truth on a national scale, because to my knowledge only the census, once a decade, provides definitive information. Another census is due in 2001, so we haven't long to wait.

My expectation is that the gap in social norms has continued to grow since 1994. I am not forecasting the breakdown of society. It may well be possible, in both the United States and Britain, that a society can tolerate a large underclass and continue to be a prosperous, powerful nation. But the costs are great. Crime is a case in point. In America, we are celebrating a 25 per cent drop in the violent crime rate since 1991. We have not achieved this by socialising the underclass. We just locked up so many people—America's prison population will reach two million this year—that the crime rate had to go down. Maybe the same strategy will work for Britain. Imprison at the same ratio to notifiable offences that we do—namely, imprison about 650,000 people, about ten times the number you currently imprison—and perhaps you too can cut your violent crime problem by 25 per cent. But the price is high.

The cost of prison cells is the least of the many prices we pay. Some of those prices are seen in growing enmity between the underclass and the overclass. They are seen in generations of children growing up in environments where they will never have a fair chance of becoming the adults they might have been. They are seen in the growth of authoritarian methods of surveillance and social control. These, not general chaos, are the prices of a large underclass. In the United States, they are on the verge of amounting to no less than the repudiation of some of the core ideals on which the nation is based. I see no reason to assume that the underclass will be less costly to Britain.

'...human institutions evolve and are sustained by deeper forces than any single generation can comprehend'

I am not going to close with the customary '...and here's what needs to be done'. I believe the problems of the underclass are driven by the breakdown in socialisation of the young, which in turn is driven by the breakdown of the family. But Britain does not have a government, or for that matter an opposition party, that is willing even to *say* that the family, traditionally defined, is crucially important, let alone act on that premise. There is little point in talking about solutions until the politicians are ready to admit that a problem exists. Let me instead close with an appeal to think about the unprecedented nature of the course that our respective countries are taking.

Edmund Burke's central insight was that human institutions evolve and are sustained by deeper forces than any single generation can comprehend. Trying to reinvent the social order by rational calculation, as the French revolutionaries were the first to attempt, is a fool's game. After the disaster of communism in the twentieth century, Burke's insight is no longer much argued. The Communists' claim that they could create a New Man is a laughing-stock of history. And yet what is happening willy-nilly throughout the industrialised West is in its way just as massive a social experiment as anything that Robespierre or Lenin had in mind.

No human institution has roots deeper than marriage, which in turn is intertwined with what appears to have been a universal law. The great anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski called it the 'principle of legitimacy'. Biologically, there is no reason that the human male cannot behave as males behave in many other species—impregnate and disappear. And yet humans have never been known to construct societies on that basis. 'The most important moral and legal rule concerning the physiological side of kinship is that no child should be brought into the world without a man—and one man at that—assuming the role of sociological father', Malinowski wrote in *Sex, Culture, and Myth*. The specific variations across cultures are many, he wrote, and '… yet through all these variations there runs the rule that the father is indispensable for the full sociological status of the child as well as its mother, that the group consisting of a mother and her offspring is sociologically incomplete and illegitimate'.[3]

Primitive cultures have implemented the principle of legitimacy instinctively. All the great civilisations have self-consciously come to understand why it came about. The great philosophers of Asia and the West alike have voiced, in different ways, the logic that led them to conclude that the family is not just one of many institutions, a nice thing to have if it is convenient, but the indispensable building block of society.

'We are acting as if all those millennia of human experience, across civilisations and races and cultures, are irrelevant'

Britain at the dawn of the new millennium, along with the United States and most European countries, is saying that this ancient and universal social law may be dispensed with. That's what an illegitimacy ratio of 38 per cent means. It is not just an abstract statistic, but a reflection of something that no human society has tried to do until now.

What leads us to believe that this leap in the dark is an acceptable risk? What is the source of our breathtaking hubris? Certainly not a considered evaluation of the facts. The facts, whether in the form of statistics or in the daily experiences of social workers and police and teachers, correspond directly with age-old beliefs about what will happen if society discards the principle of legitimacy.

Our hubris derives partly from obliviousness. I cannot think of any era in recorded history when history itself—history as a source of lessons about our own best course of action—has been treated with such contempt. Our hubris derives partly from

intellectual cowardice. The feminist revolution, for all its good effects, has also shut down certain kinds of public positions. To say that marriage is the foundation of civilisation is to know that you will be seen as a Neanderthal who wants women kept barefoot and pregnant; consequently, few people who want to be considered intellectually respectable will say it. Our hubris derives partly from self-indulgence. Sex without commitment can be lots of fun, especially at the ages when families traditionally have gotten started, and, there's no doubt about it, marriage does indeed get in the way of sex without commitment. We have conveniently concluded that what we enjoy is what we should do.

Whatever its complex combination of sources, it is indeed hubris, and we are indeed taking a leap in the dark. We are acting as if all those millennia of human experience, across civilisations and races and cultures, are irrelevant; that our particular generation just happens to have been blessed with the insight to see that everybody else has been wrong; that our generation alone has perceived the truth. Do we really believe that?

What About the Overclass?

Melanie Phillips

Like a number of people, I hate the term 'the underclass' because it suggests that there's a group of people who are an inferior and fearful breed apart.

Despite the fact that it would never use the term, though, the current government has accepted the idea. It just calls it social exclusion. The reason it's the same idea is that the government has understood that this is about more than straight poverty. It's about behaviour that has created a lifestyle which is permanently dislocated from the habits and way of life of the majority. And at its very heart is the disintegration of the family with high rates of lone parenthood and teenage pregnancy and whole communities where committed fathers are unknown. These lives are often simply chaotic. The most alarming thing if you visit such areas is to see children who aren't socialised so they can't even use a knife and fork; they don't know what an alarm clock is because they have no sense of an ordered day; primary school children who have no idea how to make social relationships but who are aggressive, foul-mouthed or withdrawn.

> ***'...there certainly is a serious problem with our very poorest citizens'***

So there certainly is a serious problem with our very poorest citizens. And this government has an ambitious programme to tackle social exclusion, turning out papers on truancy, teenage pregnancy, repairing shattered communities and so forth. All very commendable.

The problem, though, is that all this presents the socially excluded as a breed apart, as an underclass; as if their behaviour is somehow very different from the rest of society. When government officials and advisers talk about drugs, for instance, they say: well people like *us* can handle cocaine or cannabis but the very poor can't. On education, they say: nothing wrong with the education of the top two per cent, like *us*; the problems are separate—sink schools, truancy, basic literacy. And on the family, where most harm is being done to the poor, they say: *I* cohabit; *I'm* a lone parent; so there's nothing wrong with the changing family. It's the poor who are the problem.

This is not only hypocritical and unpleasant, but fails to understand how culture works: that signals matter, that they work top down and that what is supportable behaviour by the upper classes can have a disastrous impact on poor people because they don't have the soft cushion of money and privilege.

Here I very much disagree with Charles Murray. Family disintegration is certainly not confined to the lowest classes. On the contrary, it was pioneered by the upper classes. Although the social class figures are incomplete, the birth statistics show that between 1988 and 1998, jointly registered births outside marriage more than doubled in social classes one and two. In social classes four and five, by con-

trast, births outside marriage only rose by just over half as much again.

Cohabitation is also on the rise throughout society, with disastrous effects. Very few cohabitations last: the median length is under two years.[1] And although two-thirds turn into marriages, they break down more frequently than marriages with no preceding cohabitation. Despite the boasts of the élite, only about five per cent of children are brought up throughout their childhoods by cohabiting couples. And even taking into account those children whose cohabiting parents eventually marry, only 36 per cent of children born to cohabiting parents are still looked after by both parents by the time they are 16, compared to 70 per cent of children born to married couples.[2]

'signals matter, ...supportable behaviour by the upper classes can have a disastrous impact on poor people because they don't have the soft cushion of money and privilege'

So cohabitation generally is producing more family instability and more lone parents. The effects are even more catastrophic in the lowest social classes, where the breakdowns are more numerous.

Certainly, male joblessness and welfare have played an important part in the atomisation of the family life of the poor. Between them, they have created the presumption among many young women that young men are a waste of space and that mothers can have children and go it alone. For the young men, it's not just that joblessness drives away their marriage prospects, but the collapse of marriage also

reduces their drive to get and hold down a responsible job.

These are all interrelated vicious cycles. Welfare and joblessness play a role. But by themselves they would not create mass lone parenthood. The tinder to which joblessness and welfare provide the spark is our generally accepted culture which has systematically devalued marriage and redefined the family as the mother and child, with the committed father as an optional extra.

That culture was created by our élites. Family court judges turned divorce into a conduct- and responsibility-free zone. As the marriage contract became of less value than a car-hire agreement, marriage break-up became more and more likely. This left more and more children of such break-ups deeply scarred and terrified themselves of commitment. Hence the rise in cohabitation, lone parenthood and repartnering.

We know that by and large the effect on children of family fragmentation is bad in every area of their lives. And not just illegitimacy: step-parenting can create even more problems for children. I agree that we are becoming two nations, the emotionally secure and the insecure, but I think this goes across class. The erosion of commitment, trust, fidelity, the growing inability to form permanent relationships, are creating a growing climate of solitariness, which will destroy the networks of kinship by which generations look after not just children but the older generation too.

Faced with this, what is this government's response? A battery of initiatives towards the socially

'Family court judges turned divorce into a conduct- and responsibility-free zone'

excluded. But it won't do the single most necessary thing: to shore up the family structure most likely to diminish fatherlessness by promoting unequivocally marriage as a social good. Sure, ministers say marriage is desirable and two parents are generally better than one. But they immediately qualify this by saying children can be brought up just as well in any family structure. But, by and large, this simply isn't true; and by talking down marriage in this way, they will weaken it still further.

So why do they do it? The response from ministers and advisers goes something as follows. We mustn't preach and tell people how to live their lives. We must spare the feelings of those who live in unconventional family units. The idea that tax and benefits should favour marriage is ridiculous because financial incentives don't alter behaviour. We must be neutral about family structure and put children's interests first instead. It's important they keep having contact with their fathers even if the fathers aren't part of the family. Fathers must be held responsible and so we will chase them through the Child Support Agency. As for teenage pregnancy, the key is good education and getting girls to stop thinking the highest goal in life is to be a hairdresser. Above all and at all costs we must avoid repeating the 'back to basics' fiasco of the Conservatives as so many ministers can't live up to the marriage ideal. Finally, anyone who wants to restore marriage is harking back to a mythical golden age as marriage

was only invented in the 1950s and fatherhood was dreamed up by the later Victorians.

Every single one of these assumptions is not only wrong, but is making the problem of family breakdown far worse.

First, this business of preaching and interfering. This grossly misunderstands the significance of marriage and why the state is involved at all. Marriage is not a statement of a private love affair. It's a public institution for the nurture and socialisation of children. If it goes wrong, society has to pick up the pieces. All the traditional advantages and signals associated with marriage occurred because the state has a responsibility to promote social rather than antisocial outcomes.

It's not possible for this process to be value-free. Making marriage meaningless means restricting the freedom of individuals to enter into the most secure and successful structure for the rearing of children. As for sparing feelings, isn't it more important to avoid harm? And if you talk to children from lone-parent families, you often find their most powerful wish is never to do to their own children what has been done to them. By failing to educate them about what marriage is for and why it's so important, and why it's actually in the best interests not just of children but also of men and women, our élites are helping guarantee that those children will make precisely the same mistakes, despite what they most dearly want.

Moreover, so-called value-free policies have created a financial penalty against marriage, a penalty which has been increasing for years. Now the working

'Marriage is not a statement of a private love affair. It's a public institution for the nurture and socialisation of children'

families tax credit (WFTC) is loading the dice against marriage even more. It leaves families headed by married couples very much poorer than single people or other households. In the desperation to drive lone parents out to work the government has invented a subsidised industry of childcare, redefining the family at the bottom of the income scale as a mother-and-child unit to which all benefits are due, making it easier to dispense with men. Instead of a family wage we now have a single-parent family wage. For the concept of the male breadwinner has become taboo, except when the marriage has broken down or never happened. When men are married, breadwinning is said to make them bad fathers because they're not around to change the nappies. If the marriage breaks down, though, men will be pursued for every penny they have. Is it any wonder that men have become reluctant to marry?

Ministers and advisers say that money incentives make no difference to family behaviour: remarkable from a government whose policies, from restoring the work ethic to encouraging breastfeeding, are all about using financial incentives to change behaviour.

Instead, they say, they are putting children's interests first. These are defined as financial. Certainly we should be concerned about children living in poverty. But lone parents are poor principally because they are lone parents. It's very hard *not* to be poor on one wage. If lone parents work, their children

will simply become the children of the working poor. And the greatest harm to children is done by not having fathers. A policy that condones or promotes fatherlessness puts children's interests last.

Because the government is desperate to avoid being judgmental about marriage, it has devised a number of displacement exercises to make it appear to be shoring up family life. It has done this by defining the family as anything anyone wants it to be, and being generous to everybody, and by redefining fatherhood. So we're told it's possible to be as good a father if the man is living apart from his family as if he is still there. Indeed, he may even be a better father if he is living apart because many fathers living with their families are 'not there' for their children. He's more likely to 'be there' for his children, it seems, if he's not there at all. So the good father has been reduced to a sperm donor, walking wallet and mother's au-pair. Just consider the fate of the unsocialised boy. Never having been brought up by his own father, and having seen his traditional breadwinner role trashed, he is now being told he has to become emotionally and socially literate to qualify as a member of the human race. He's the paradigm for a totally new human being; what a shame he doesn't realise it. Now a whole industry has sprung up, with Home Office grants, to analyse the 'crisis of masculinity'.

Is it surprising that socially excluded boys now run a mile from marriage? Is it any wonder that without jobs paying boys a family wage it's not in a girl's interests to get married, while welfare means she can survive reasonably O.K., given her appalling low

expectations of life formed by seeing the similar lives of her friends, her mother and mother's friends? Yet our élites say fatuously that teenage pregnancy results from lack of sex education. On the contrary, all they get in schools is sex education; what has gone out the window is morality.

'...the good father has been reduced to a sperm donor, walking wallet and mother's au-pair'

Instead of working out ways of restoring incentives to marriage, our élites rubbish it in private and in public. Terrified of being held to personal account for their own behaviour, they have abandoned their duty to set an example. Indeed, the very notion of setting an example is regarded with horror as élitist. Yet that's what élites are supposed to be: élitist. Once, they regarded it as their duty to embody by personal example and in public policy the philosophy that bourgeois values were a way of raising the sights of the lowest, enabling them to rise out of poverty and social disadvantage. That project has been turned on its head. Bourgeois values have become despised. So marriage was attacked; literacy was attacked; formal sanctions policing civilised values against wrongdoing through criminal punishment and informal sanctions policing them through stigma were attacked. The very idea of the respectable and normal became seen as oppressive. So the unrespectable and abnormal became not just tolerated but *de rigeur*.

The outcome is the socially excluded who are no longer just poor but the victims of anti-education, anti-marriage policies which have undermined personal responsibility. To be called a moraliser, after

all, is now our greatest insult. The result is that behaviour among the élites that may be painful but is survivable is being promoted to the lowest classes for whom it is a disaster. That is why social exclusion cannot be tackled properly unless its roots in the feckless behaviour of the overclass, the intellectual and political élites, is addressed as well.

Notes

Charles Murray

1 Murray, C., *Does Prison Work?*, London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1997.

2 Report, *Daily Mail*, 16 June 1999.

3 Malinowski, B., *Sex, Culture and Myth*, 1930, quoted in Moynihan, D.P., *Family and Nation*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, pp. 169-70.

Melanie Phillips

1 Ermisch, J., *Pre-marital Cohabitation, Child-bearing and the Creation of One-Parent Families*, ESRC Research Centre on Micro-Social Change, Paper No. 95-17, 1995, from British Household Panel Study; and Ermisch J. and Francesconi, M., *Cohabitation in Great Britain: Not For Long But Here To Stay*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, 1998.

2 Ermisch, J. and Francesconi, M., in *Seven Years in the Lives of British Families*, edited by Berthoud, R. and Gershuny, J., Policy Press/Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2000.

Bibliography

Charles Murray's writings on the underclass in Britain:

'Underclass', first published in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, 26 November 1989, was published in book form by the Health and Welfare Unit of the Institute of Economic Affairs in association with the *Sunday Times* as *The Emerging British Underclass* in May 1990, with commentaries by Frank Field, Joan C. Brown, Alan Walker, Nicholas Deakin.

'Underclass: The Crisis Deepens', first published in the *Sunday Times*, 22 May 1994, and 'The New Victorians and the New Rabble', first published in the *Sunday Times*, 29 May 1994, were published in book form as *Underclass: The Crisis Deepens* by the Health and Welfare Unit of the Institute of Economic Affairs in association with the *Sunday Times* in September 1994, with commentaries by Pete Alcock, Miriam David, Melanie Phillips, Sue Slipman.

Charles Murray and the Underclass: The Developing Debate, published by the Health and Welfare Unit of the Institute of Economic Affairs in association with the *Sunday Times* in November 1996, incorporated all of the material from the previous two books, with the addition of an editor's introduction by Ruth Lister and a statistical update by Alan Buckingham.

'Baby Beware', first published in the *Sunday Times*, 13 February 2000, is published here in book form for

the first time by Civitas: Institute for the Study of Civil Society in association with the *Sunday Times*, with a commentary by Melanie Phillips based on her contribution to a debate held at Church House, Westminster on 9 May 2000, organised by the *Sunday Times*.

Also available from Civitas

Charles Murray and the Underclass: the Developing Debate

Charles Murray

Commentaries by Frank Field, Joan C. Brown, Alan Walker, Nicholas Deakin, Pete Alcock, Miriam David, Melanie Phillips, Sue Slipman.

Edited by Ruth Lister

£8.00, 150pp, Nov 1996, ISBN: 1-903386-92-6

"If you want to read one book specifically on the 'underclass', this is it"

Community Care

Does Prison Work?

Charles Murray
Commentaries by Jock Young, Andrew Rutherford, Malcolm Davies

£6.00, 56pp, June 1997, ISBN: 1-903386-88-8