

The price of economic barbarism: An uncomfortable truth

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It was only through coming to the end of my story that it confirms in me that for the first time in the history of human ecology the survival of the rich was now dependent on the liberation of the poor. As Andrew Lyon from the international futures forum said, we cannot return to what was never there even if we wanted to. We need to try and find ways of what it means to be human. Learn to love and get along with each other and with the rest of the planet, species and habitats. Otherwise we will really be the generation that breaks the bank. The planet and poverty and all that goes with it really will cost us all the earth. (McCormack, 2009, p. 264)

Having campaigned for most of my life against poverty I was thrilled when the Church of Scotland Assembly appointed me as one of their 14 Commissioners to report back on ‘the purposes of economic activity’. Our report, *A Right Relationship with Money* (Church of Scotland Special Commission on the Purposes of Economic Activity, 2012) which gives an overall view, was presented to the Assembly in May 2012. However, having spent two years sitting round a table bearing witness to the vast amount of evidence that was presented to us, it was a real disappointment that all the evidence had to be compressed to accommodate the size and scale of the ‘Assembly’s Blue Book’ series. So I am pleased to have the opportunity to present this article as part of my wider global campaigning work.

Facing the truth of the evidence presented to us in the Commission was no easy task. We were in agreement that the model of the economy that has dominated the UK for most of the last three decades has failed all but the few. However there were differences of opinion between us concerning the real objectives of this model and the ideology underlying it. The key sticking point was about ‘intentionality’. Are the current devastating effects on our communities an unfortunate side-effect of governmental social and economic policies, or are they an inherent part of the economic model that

continues to be deployed? This is the question I want to address in this article.

My own journey to begin to answer this question began in 1987 when I watched Margaret Thatcher on TV deliver her ‘there is no such thing as a society’ address to the Church of Scotland Assembly. What she actually said was:

Any set of social and economic arrangement which is not founded on individual responsibility will do nothing but harm. We are all responsible for our own actions. We cannot blame society if we disobey the laws. We simply can’t delegate the exercise of mercy and generosity to others...

I felt outraged as she kept saying, ‘we have got to give people individual choice’ when an estimated 10 million families like mine in Britain were already condemned to living in freezing cold, damp living conditions and the only real choices we were having to make was between feeding our hungry fuel card meter, our hungry children, or dying from the hypothermia the market economy unleashed.

In the early 1980s, both the Reagan and Thatcher administrations changed their economies from an industrial to a ‘money market’ one. Millions of families like mine were thrown onto the unemployment scrapheap and forced to live on welfare – our lives dependent on tins of surplus food and butter

from the European Food Mountains. We were forced to live like animals – our lives revolving around meal times.

Gradually, the ideology underlying this model began to be exposed. In the 1980s, Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, said in a speech that we should now think about training people for jobs which are, as he put it, “not so much low-tech as no-tech”. Writing in that period, G. A. Cohen asked:

What sort of education is contemplated in that snappy statement “not so much low-tech as no-tech”? Not an education that nourishes the creative powers of young people and brings forth their full capacity. Nigel Lawson is saying that it’s dangerous to educate the young too much, because then we produce cultivated people who aren’t suited to the low-grade jobs that the market will offer them.

During the same period a leaked memo from a senior official at the Department of Education and Science said something similar:

We are beginning to create aspirations which society cannot match. When young people can’t find work which meets their abilities and expectations, then we are only creating frustration, with disturbing social consequences. We have to ration educational opportunities so that the society can cope with the output of education. People must be educated once more to know their place.

This was a deliberate policy to diminish young people’s aspirations and fit them into a low wage economy – but only certain young people.

Paying the Price

Next, it began to be clear who were

going to be the casualties of this economic model. In 1991, Norman Lamont, the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, in response to questions about the 3 million unemployed answered: “rising unemployment and the recession have been the price that we have had to pay to get inflation down. That price is well worth paying”. But who was paying this price? Certainly not the Chancellor’s friends.

In 1998, controversy surrounded the Governor of the Bank of England Eddie George (who later claimed he was misquoted) suggesting that: ‘three million unemployed was a price worth paying’. He provoked further outrage by his comment that job losses in the north¹ were an acceptable price to pay for curbing inflation in the south. However economists argued that the governor was quite right – that a rise in unemployment means less pressure on wage increases that can cause inflation.

So it is quite clear that creating unemployment is an inherent part of this economic model – but not for those at the top of society. Even today our governments keep insisting that the only route out of poverty is work despite the fact that the majority of the poor in Britain are the working poor. Their priorities and concerns are visible in their policy choices. How many people know for example that in the UK the British tax payer subsidises the aviation industry in Britain to the estimated tune of over £9 billion (AUD\$13.44 billion) a year because they do not have to pay tax on fuel while our old people freeze to death and families are being ripped off by the fuel boards?

The lives of families living in these industrialised communities have been devastated and some not yet recovered. But now these policies which have a total disregard for the lives of ordinary people are being repeated with high unemployment and rights to benefits and everything else needed for survival being systematically taken away and all under the camouflage of democracy:

- The UK is the 7th richest country in the world but, in terms of equitable distribution of wealth, only Portugal, the United States of America and Singapore do worse and the gap between rich and poor is wider now than in the times of Dickens.
- The UK has the highest levels of child poverty throughout the industrialised world.

A War without Bullets

Lastly, and perhaps the cruellest aspect of this policy, is the propaganda directed against those who are suffering from it. It was bad enough being forced to live on welfare and in poverty without getting the blame but when all the propaganda started pouring out of the Murdoch press and was then reinforced by politicians talking about ‘hard working families’ and programmes on the BBC positioning the unemployed as lazy work shy scroungers wanting to live in a dependency culture, I realised that there was a ‘war against the poor’ – only this war was a ‘war without bullets’, a social, economic, psychological and propaganda war, a war fought with briefcases instead of guns against our own fellow citizens to try and safely dispose of all the people in our world who have become ‘surplus to market requirements’. A global market economy which the bankers and the politicians still keep referring to as being ‘free’ but in reality has enslaved our humanity in a race towards human, social, economic and environmental destruction – and where the wealth in this country has not been trickling down from the rich but gushing up from the poor. It is a war which has intensified under the UK Coalition Government which is now also targeting the sick, the disabled and even the terminally ill.

The younger generation who are trying to fight these injustices and trying to save our people and our planet – those who try to oppose government policies, challenge the role of the banks, or take part in any

disturbances – are now regarded as ‘terrorists’ or criminalised.

The Casualties

Life now for many of our fellow citizens has become a constant daily battle for survival and many are under attack on all fronts. Three decades of both the stigmatisation and the demonization of the poor, single parents, the unemployed, teenagers and the working classes by the media and political rhetoric have also rubbed salt into the wounds of our fellow citizens who, to all intents and purposes, have been robbed of the simple joy of just living. The real tragedy however is that those who are effectively excluded from society have internalised the blame and guilt and often believe themselves not to be good enough for anything.

Fuel Poverty

Poverty has always been the biggest killer known to science. How many people in this country are aware for example that the London School of Economics estimated that, in 2010/11, 24,000 thousand of our old and vulnerable people died needlessly from hypothermia and other cold related illness. They estimated that in 2011/12, 27,000 will die but that this is just the tip of the iceberg. Yet if a wee dog froze to death in one of their homes no doubt there would be a public outcry!

Recent estimated figures show that over 1 million families in Scotland are experiencing fuel poverty and having to make real choices between heating, eating or putting clothes on the backs of the children; some are so cold and hungry that like in Victorian times our fellow citizens are dependent on charities to dish them out food. Was this the real individual choices that Maggie was referring to at the General Assembly?

Academics used to define and measure fuel poverty when households have to pay more than 10% of their income on fuel. Now recent surveys have shown that this has now

risen to 20% and for the working poor and people on benefits are often spending as much as 35%. Evidence has also emerged that the poorest who try to budget with 'pay as you go' meters are further penalised and charged at a much higher tariff for gas and electricity because they do not have a bank account so cannot pay by direct debit. Evidence too that wealth in this country is not trickling down to, but gushing up from, the poor.

Most people do not understand either what happens to the poor and working poor alike when they run out of money to feed their hungry fuel card meters when their priority is to try and feed their hungry children. They become self-disconnected and are forced to live in the cold and the dark and feed their babies on cold milk and live by the candle light. Having no electricity means they don't have any access to hot water either to have a bath or to be able to cook.

The Return of Victorian Public Health Concerns

So is it any real surprise that apart from malnutrition, homelessness and fuel poverty, many of the other public health concerns that inspired the public health movement in Victorian times are starting to rear their ugly heads again like rickets, overcrowding and tuberculosis? The work of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett and their book *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) was cited by many who gave evidence to our Commission. Their world-wide research shows that the social problems facing us in the 21st century like violence, crime, obesity, physical and mental ill-health, drug abuse, gang warfare, domestic violence, family breakdown, are all symptoms of and human responses to, hugely unequal societies like the UK.

Unlike Victorian times however, there is a wider choice of drugs – legal or illegal – to which those excluded from modern-day society often must turn to try and cope with

the pain and try to escape from a world where the rich and powerful do everything in their power to promote their own welfare regardless of how many people they hurt, kill or make poor in the process. But like Victorian times, the most popular form of escapism still remains alcohol. In my view, however, increasing the price of alcohol in our society is another form of escapism by a society that is addicted to treating the symptoms of everything and tackling the causes of nothing.

During the Thatcher and Major administrations, their austerity cuts and 'Welfare Reforms' wiped-out a whole generation of working class teenagers when they were not only denied the right to work but also had their rights to benefits taken away. Many were forced to live on the streets beside the rubbish and some forced into prostitution, others turned to drugs to try and escape the inhumanity and insanity of their lived reality. Now David Cameron's government is on the attack again – they want to cut Housing Benefit for the under-25 year olds. (Leunig, 2012)

The Scottish Government's own statistics demonstrate that there has been a continuous increase in the number of prescriptions for antidepressants, from 1.16 million in 1992/93 to 4.3 million in 2009/10, with a commensurate increase in cost. Estimated daily use of antidepressant drugs by the population aged 15 to 90 increased from 1.9% in 1992/93 to 10.4% in 2009/10. Even more shocking are the statistics cited by all the 'Mental Health' organisations, including the World Health Organisation, of the increasing number of small children and teenagers suffering from depression and dependant on legalised drugs and the increase in suicide rates.

Unemployment: A Weapon of Mass Destruction

I now want to include two contributions to the Commission which support my thesis

that there is a war being waged against the poor in this country.

During its deliberations, the Commission heard a presentation from Professor David Fryer, who is currently Head of Research at the Australian Institute of Psychology, Professor Extraordinarius at the University of South Africa and Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Stirling, Scotland. He has spent his life researching the detrimental mental health effects of unemployment on the unemployed, their families and communities and the links with suicide. He explained how the economy works – that stock exchanges tend to rise with increases of unemployment. There is even a technical term – NAIRU (Non Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment) – which refers to the level of unemployment required to prevent inflation (4-6%). Unemployment is a deliberate tool of the money market economy, not an unforeseen side effect. It is meant to be both painful and hurtful.

In answer to a question he posed “Why is unemployment good for the establishment?” he stated that it:

- Provides a pool of potential workers to do the most boring, dirty, dead end, menial, underpaid, temporary, insecure, stressful jobs;
- Provides consumers of substandard products and services which would otherwise be ‘wasted’;
- Provides competition for jobs from unemployed people allowing employers to drive down wages and working conditions; and
- Increases profits for employers by work being done by fewer employees so reducing wages bill.

He wrote an extra comment to the Commission after his presentation:

Poverty and inequality, especially preventable poverty and inequality, cause untold misery, morbidity and mortality in rich

societies like the OECD countries and the UK in particular. Decades of painstaking research by social scientists, especially recently epidemiologists, has proven beyond reasonable doubt that inequality and poverty have incalculably destructive personal, family, community, national and international costs. It is an outrage and should be a source of great shame that our Governments, instead of seeking to reduce poverty and inequality, seem hell-bent on creating more and more unequal and poverty stricken societies in the UK. Most politicians pay lip service to poverty reduction but enact policies which increase poverty for millions. There may have been mass public campaigns seeking to “Make Poverty History” but contemporary poverty has got worse and poverty is being manufactured for future generations too. The current mishandling of the economy by the UK Government is exacerbating the problems of poverty and inequality as cuts to public spending increase homelessness and unemployment and cuts to public spending disproportionately impact on people living on benefits and disability allowance. In my view we are about to witness a public health catastrophe and humanitarian crisis of 21st Century Britain. A growing number of activists, intellectuals, scientists and health researchers around the world have now started to agree that this social violence in the form of poverty and inequality is a ‘war against the poor’ fought

with economic theories and social policies instead of bullets but even more deadly. They argue that the plight of poor people is becoming more and more desperate as a result of neo-liberalism, conservatism and capitalism in government, business and in the media fighting a psychological war without bullets against the poor which saps resistance and induces victim-blaming even amongst those suffering most from poverty and inequality. In the war against the poor the Church has to ask whose side it is on.

The Rise of the New ‘Barbarism’

The second contribution is drawn from the work of an Australian psychologist, Dr Katie Thomas whose book on the new ‘Barbarism’ I reviewed for the Commission (Thomas, 2011). It really provoked one of the most stimulating debates we had had and had us all really challenging each other. Her research and findings cut through the current discourse on economics, the recession, and welfare and provided us all with a new way of thinking. Her work focuses on the vulnerability of small children and the feminisation of poverty in the wake of ‘welfare reforms’ that have been implemented in Australia (reforms first pioneered by the Clinton Administration in the US and overseen in Australia by our very own Yvette Cooper, Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions). Thomas addresses the plight of mothers and small children in cultures which have embraced an aggressive market economy – Australia, America and Britain. For example, women who are working full-time caring for children in their early years are considered by the state to be ‘unemployed’ and ‘unproductive’. This discouragement and oppression of women who are already providing 40-60

hours a week of unpaid work to ensure the well-being of their children (and the future productivity of the state) is seriously detrimental not only to the mother but to the development of her children and to the future health of society.

Thomas develops the shocking concept of “Barbarism” in her book to try and explain what is happening to our social norms in the modern day context. She suggests that ‘barbarism’ is synonymous with a belief system in the superiority of some people and a willingness to use cruel, vicious behaviours towards those who are considered inferior or undeserving in any way. It is considered acceptable within barbaric philosophy to exert power and control over those who are classed by barbaric philosophy as less powerful or ‘unworthy’ and to use whatever tactics are most effective to maintain control over said humans, including tactics which are inhuman or cruel. Thomas suggests that barbaric behaviour was financially advantageous in the 20th and now in the 21st global market. ‘Cut-throat’ tactics and ‘hostile takeovers’ not only enabled profiteering but were lauded as model conduct:

Under the powerful benefaction of the reified market; ruthless, brutal and even savage behaviours towards other human beings gained immunity from social stigma. Callous indifference towards the suffering of individuals, families, communities and nations exploited in the name of profit, not only became ‘de rigueur’, but progressed in social acceptability to socially normal and finally, to the position of being cited as a prototype for success. (Thomas, 2011, p. 3).

Currently our country is becoming even more barbaric in that mothers in refuge are only given three months to get their head together before have to sign on as a job

seeker. If they refuse to take any job that is offered, then they are being forced to work for their benefits at the equivalent of £1.67 (AUD\$2.49) per hour. Who is going to look after their children? Finally, Thomas also highlights how this “barbaric” philosophy which dominates western societies filters into every aspect of our lives and threatens our whole survival – how we live in an era where these barbaric acts against the poor and defenceless, conducted by the wealthiest and the most powerful, are condoned or ignored by the majority. How does this happen?

The Wide Gulf in Understanding between Rich and Poor

‘Oppression’ designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power intends to keep them down, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society. (Iris Marion Young, 1988, p. 272)

Do we see ourselves as a well-intentioned liberal society? Have our everyday practices become barbaric? And if so, how can the effects be ignored? The material gap between rich and poor is wide but in my view this is nothing compared with the wide gulf in understanding. As a result of the politicians and media representation of the poor, unlike our counterparts in Europe, many in the UK still perceive modern-day poverty and inequalities as the fault of the individual rather than a very structured set of social and economic arrangements that benefits the minority at the expense of the exploitation of the majority. In English speaking nations particularly, the idea has taken hold that the poor are to blame for their plight. But blaming the poor, and even God, and using them as scapegoats has a long pedigree! So too have the Victorian values and principles of separating the poor into those that are ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ which was reinforced by Margaret Thatcher

at the General Assembly and which became the mantra of successive governments. What seems to be different now, and ‘barbaric’, however, is that in Britain we not only blame the victims of our human exploitation culture but continue to persecute them as well. All the propaganda, political spin and media manipulation has confused the public so much they have lost their ability to separate fact from fiction and so the real threats to all our lives are trivialised and the resultant confusion leaves us unable to take appropriate action. Even the divide between the working and middle class has become so vast that some are now unable to grasp the real life situation of their fellow citizens. And over time the norm of ridiculing those who are not in the elite has been legitimised through reality TV such as the ‘X Factor’. Overcoming this misconception needs to become a priority for while it reigns supreme, human relationships based on intrinsic respect for the other will remain compromised along with the potential of many lives. Social and economic distance undermines a willingness to relate to, let alone support, people outside one’s own circle and habitat.

At the seminars organised by Oxfam in January 2011, ‘Whose Economy – Winners and Losers’, a number of speakers referred to the destructive effects of this gulf between people at a society level – that collective bonds of empathy are being shredded by inequality and polarisation. These collective bonds help to support the universal principle of the Welfare State (McKee & Stuckler, 2011). Nye Bevan, the post-war architect of the National Health Service (NHS) drew on the same value in describing the NHS as ‘an act of collective goodwill’.

The situation is critical. While I was participating in the United Nation Commission on Sustainable Development in 1994, the then General Secretary of the UN, Boutros Boutros Gali said what the world is experiencing is ‘social and economic

Darwinism' and then the Cuban ambassador referred to the global market economy as a social and economic time-bomb that would explode in all our faces. Now history is repeating itself all over again as 'Thatcher's children' have grown up and dominate our Parliament – determined to get rid of the welfare state all together. Worst still, the politicians in our coalition government, some of who have never worked a day in their lives in a job outside politics, have been responsible for creating social and economic policies that have introduced a form of slave labour back into our country. They are now forcing the unemployed to work for nothing to replace the jobs of the people in the public sector whom they have made redundant under the camouflage of their so called 'austerity cuts'.

Nowhere to be Seen: The Victims of Social and Economic Apartheid

Two experiences stick in my mind. On the initiative of Catholic Archbishop Mario Conti, a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, a full day conference took place in the City Chambers in Glasgow in 2007 entitled 'Transcending Poverties'. The subject, 'Will the poor always be with us?' The fee for attendance was more than the people who they claimed to represent have to live on for a whole week. This was alright for the people employed by various poverty agencies as their fees were paid by their organisations. However, the organiser's lack of trust in the poor meant that registration for people forced to live on benefits and claiming a concessionary fee was subject to them producing evidence like an identity card from the DWP (Department of Work and Pensions) that they were the genuine poor.

The event was packed out and part sponsored by the Herald². The Herald journalist and economist Alf Young was invited to do the summing up and he followed this up with an article in the paper on 27th February 2007.

After listening to 16 distinguished speakers from academia, civic life and the churches dissect questions such as 'will the poor always be with us?' a woman in the audience called out to have her say. In a few sentences her passion cut through all the PowerPoint presentations and subtle ambiguities of the title dreamed up by the day's organisers, the Royal Society of Edinburgh. This was about people who feel physically and spiritually shut off from life in the city mainstream, hidden away from the Glasgow of new jobs, designer shopping, waterfront apartments, festivals, boutique hotels and café culture. And to be brutally honest, six hours of learned discourse and debate produced very little fresh prescriptions for how to bring that resilient system of apartheid to an end.

He drew attention to the composition of the audience:

Around the victims of social and economic apartheid... a poverty industry has grown up that not only claims to represent their interest but also profits from that same advocacy. It provides lots of well-meaning people with warm homes, cars in the drive, plasma TVs, meals out and two or three foreign holidays a year – the material aspirations that are now the norm for British citizens on average and above-average incomes. The longer the poor are still with us, the longer these groups have a professional *raison d'être*. You could see some of the participants bristle with indignation at the very thought. But it was striking that the

dispossessed, the real victims of social and economic apartheid, were nowhere to be seen.

The other experience was that rainy wet day in George Square Glasgow, when my civic leaders gave Nelson Mandela the freedom of my city – a freedom which they have denied the people living in their own townships. I kept asking myself what was going through the minds of those who organised the wonderful celebration that day. Were they so oblivious to their own social and economic apartheid they could celebrate the end of someone else's? But as a fellow community activist Michael Docherty said to me, 'our social and economic apartheid has been made to look so innocent because our oppressors are the same colour'. Aye, warm homes, cars in the drive, plasma TVs, meals out and two or three foreign holidays a year is a far cry from the reality of the lives of our fellow oppressed citizens who have never even had a holiday and cannot even afford the bus fares to travel from their deprived townships into their city centre; far less afford the fares to search for the few jobs that exist or visit their wider families. The rest of the world is viewed entirely through their TV screens and subjected to constant harassment by the 'bully boys' employed by the BBC to pay their licence. Some mothers who would rather feed their hungry children and cannot pay the £1000 (AUD\$1494) fine end up in jail. Who is looking after their children?

In November 2011, Frances Fox Piven (2011) an American Professor of political science and sociology, wrote:

We've been at war for decades now – not just in Afghanistan or Iraq, but right here at home. Domestically, it's been a war against the poor, but if you hadn't noticed, that's not surprising. You wouldn't often have found the casualty figures from this particular conflict in your local newspaper or on the nightly TV

news. Devastating as it's been, the war against the poor has gone largely unnoticed – until now.

If the people in this country are really serious about addressing poverty and inequalities in the UK or indeed 'the war on the poor' we need to understand and 'get to grips' with the endemic structural discrimination and vested interests embedded in the social, economic, political and other powerful institutions.

A Christian Response

It became clear to the Commissioners that the real political, social and economic crisis that we have all found ourselves in has provided us all with an opportunity to take stock of our own lives and to try and find new ways to embrace our common humanity and create a society where love and faith in each other becomes a higher human goal than faith in money.

In response to what became to be known as Thatcher's famous 'Sermon on the Mound' in 1988 to the Assembly of the Church of Scotland, I picked up my pen and wrote a Letter to God about this war on the poor and the demonization of the unemployed and the working classes.

Dear God, I don't know how I am ever going to post this letter to you. I used to go to your house every Sunday but now you never seem to be in. Have you changed to a new address God? When I first had to accept that World War III had begun God, my first thoughts were for my children, what would happen to them? I wanted to run but where to God – there was no escape.....

I showed my Letter to God to my local Minister and he decided to have it published. Then the following year I was invited to read it out at the Church of Scotland Board of Ministry & Women's Council – from the same pulpit where Margaret Thatcher had

delivered her speech. Both of us were featured on a BBC 2 nationwide documentary, 'Your Health's Your Wealth' in 1990.

Nelson Mandela in his autobiography, 'The Long Walk to Freedom' stated that the first causality of any war is the truth. He also wrote, 'the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. The man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred locked up behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness so the oppressed and oppressor both are robbed of their humanity.'

Both the lay people and theologians alike on the Commission expressed their very deep concerns of how people who claim to be Christians have become complacent in their approach to follow the teaching of their Spiritual Leader, Jesus Christ in his continuing spiritual battle to fight and overcome poverty, oppression and war and in particular our institutionalised church bodies.

We came to the conclusion, that some people have misunderstood his teachings and have interpreted 'the poor will always be with us' as an indication that what Jesus was actually saying was, that we will never 'solve' the problem of poverty, and so we shouldn't get too caught up in trying to overcome! That it is okay to get rich quick and rob everybody including their granny and turn a 'deaf ear' to the human cries of injustice that are screaming out all around them?

It had also become clear to some of us on the Commission, that many men, women and children in Britain are now being denied their very basic needs for survival. Apart from our so-called mother of all democracies and a Prime Minister claiming that our Parliament is rooted in the very foundations of Christianity, some of us questioned the role of the Church. I felt really strongly, that we need to ensure that the Church works within the terms of the European Convention on Human Rights and that this perhaps merits further investigation. Recently extracts from

the writing by the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams about the 'Big Society' show him to be a fierce critic of the government's agenda. He dismissed David Cameron's 'Big Society' as 'aspirational waffle' and seen as a ploy to conceal 'a deeply damaging withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities to the most vulnerable'.

Living in denial or ignorance of the reality of this war on the most defenceless and vulnerable people in our society and 'burying our head in the sand' is not an option and we shall all do so at our own children's peril; further evidence demonstrated that these immoral structures penetrate every aspect of our lives and now threaten all of our survival (Bell, 2012). To take no action will also rob us all of the right to become fully human and condemn many Scots to an early grave and future generations to a life characterised by poverty, high mortality, economic inactivity, mental and physical ill-health, poor educational attainment, and increasing exclusion. It also denies the casualties of this war any public right to justice and an opportunity for all of us to reclaim back our humanity that has been stolen.

And Now the Good News

I never really appreciate the full meaning of the word 'vision' until that day in 1985 when the youngest of my three children was only six months old. I had felt so powerless to change our cruel reality and had become more of a afraid of living that I ever did about dying that I found myself praying to God with my whole heart and soul to allow me to go back to sleep and never wake up again. I had been made to feel such a failure as mother that I kept thinking that if only I could die then surely someone in their right mind would come and rescue my children from the insanity of our lived reality.

Fortunately, my spirit proved to be less of a coward than me and quite simply refused

to allow me to roll over and pretend that I was dead. Instead it switched a light on inside my head that enabled me to see things, which at that time, were away beyond my full understanding. I did understand however that no one was coming to my children's rescue and that my duty as a mother was no longer in the kitchen but in the world. I also realised that men in politics and dominated world attitudes for long enough and although they claimed to be experts on everything my experience showed that they understood very little. Nor did they seem to care very much about women and children or understand our fragile relationships with nature. My spirit also enabled me to see that I would be enabled to travel the world in search of the truth. This is my truth. What a relief to know that we all more than just a 'bag of bones dressed up in a birthday suit'.

The Wee Yellow Butterfly

In 1992 I went to Nicaragua not to see how I could help the poor and oppressed but to see how they could help the poor in my country. One of the most important lessons that the women taught me was by Fernando Cardenal, who when he was education minister and co-ordinator of the literacy crusade in Nicaragua, taught them that to create a new nation, they had to begin with an education that would liberate people minds. He said: 'Only through understanding their past and present and analysing their reality can people be free to choose their future. 'That made so much sense to me and became my mission after I came back from Nicaragua.

One of the visits I made was to a community where people eked their living by picking out items to sell from the rubbish dump. I saw wee yellow butterflies flitting across the filth and detritus. Alfonso, one of the community leaders in this poor barrio, explained to me that Nicaraguans believe that when there is a plague of these butterflies, peace will come. It was Alfonso

who told me that the people in this community were regarded as the underclass. We all had a good laugh when I explained that I came from a poor 'barrio' in Scotland, where we, too, were no longer regarded as people either. We all hugged each other before leaving; like all the other real live people I met in Nicaragua, unashamed to embrace our common spirit of humanity.

And so my journey in search of the truth and now my experience as a Commission member has enabled me to understand that in a sense Margaret Thatcher was right; we really do have real individual choices. Either we can choose to be like the mosquito and continue to drain the life blood out of people, or we can choose to be like the wee yellow butterfly and flutter into each other's lives and enrich each other with our community humanity, love and understanding.

*Without vision we shall all perish
(Proverb 29:18)*

Notes

¹Of the UK.

²The Glasgow Herald newspaper.

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Author biography

Cathy McCormack lives in Glasgow, Scotland, in one of Europe's largest post-war working-class housing projects (Greater Easterhouse) which the media still regard as being one of the poorest and most deprived communities in Britain. Cathy is a long-term campaigner on poverty, housing, health and climate change and her writings and broadcast have received international acclaim. Cathy is also widely known in Britain as a social commentator for the people and an inspiring speaker. Her biography, *The Wee Yellow Butterfly* which was published in 2009, is local-global story providing a critical analysis of the social, political, economic, psychological and structural violence that is being waged against the poor and working class in Britain where the rich and powerful do everything in their power to promote their own welfare regardless of how many people they make poor, hurt or kill in the process: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Yellow-Butterfly-McCormack-Marian-Pallister/dp/1906134294>

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