

Knife through the stereotypes

AROUND ABOUT THE time I was still doing juvenile court crime – like delinquency, a practice one hopes to grow out of – the fashion was to blame all society’s ills on single mothers. As far as the tabloids and government policy (often indistinguishable, then as now) was concerned, their general fecklessness, indolence and irresponsibility was to blame for everything. Specifically, their pig-headed refusal to have truck with the absent heroes who had fathered their children was the root cause of ‘Britain’s Breakdown’. It was always a surprise to go to court and meet the reality – worried, hard working, committed women trying to keep their families together against the odds. Not all of course – the odourously pissed mama, a stranger to education, employment or indeed soap, who swigged cans of loopy juice while letting rip to her strongly held views about immigration and shouting obscenities at her 11-year-old wasn’t a particularly great advert for motherhood, or indeed our species. Her mantra was that Britain was no longer a place for the decent white working class, like her. After an afternoon of this I did mutter ‘Well, one out of three ain’t bad’ but by then she was too drunk to hear it. But I remember her as a glorious exception to the norm – the majority were wilfully misrepresented.

The enemy within

Fashions change. Then we demonised mothers. Now we demonise their children. Drunk killers roaming our streets in feral gangs, the pockets of their hoodies bulging with crack, guns and knives, they must be contained by ABSOs, done for breach, banged up, kept under perpetual surveillance, filmed in their faces, banned from the streets after 9pm, be curfewed, tagged, and blasted by high powered supersonic noise if they lurk outside shopping centres. Adults who approach them will be knifed; teachers will be abused, police officers assaulted... a Martian landing in a newsagents or a Home Office policy meeting might well think other aliens had got here first, and we were in a state of siege from the enemy within.

What must it be like to be a child in our society, knowing that adults think of you like this? Or at least think of your peers like that,

if you are a ‘good child’ who does not fit the stereotype? When did we learn to be frightened of our children? And when, more to the point, did they learn to be frightened of each other?

The debate about knife crime has prompted the government to do what it always does – announce more criminal justice measures. Young people between 16 and 18 found with knives will no longer be cautioned but prosecuted, even where it is a first offence, and the under-16s will be cautioned and referred to ‘education’ about the dangers of knife crime. Why need they be cautioned at all? Why is criminalisation seen as an answer to everything? Caution is recordable sub-convictions, which instantly remove the child from the ranks of ‘us’ to the growing legions of ‘them’ without any apparent deterrent effect.

Forefit a knife policy

If, as the research indicates, children carry knives because they are themselves frightened of attack then criminalising them for fear without removing the root cause is a pointless exercise. It would be more effective to have community police officers properly hooked into the life and culture of the area, with some interviewing skills, to talk to the child, talk to his or her parents, find out how real the fear was, and use the information to target those causing the fear. Education wouldn’t go amiss – but delivered perhaps by someone the child could respond to, through a mentoring scheme or community group. Effective legislation for this group would be a power to the police to forfeit a knife carried by an under-16-year-old without having to prove it was criminally carried – penknives permitted, anything else filched and binned.

The actual figures on knife crime – albeit difficult to determine year-on-year because of changing definitions about what it is – seem to demonstrate that injuries and deaths caused by knives are not going up, but the age of the victims and perpetrators is going down. That is genuinely frightening and no one living in London can look at the teenage



deaths this year without despair. But using the criminal justice system to fix this is a wasteful exercise in shutting stable doors. The CJS is at best a regulatory and rehabilitation system and not a prophylactic for social ills. The first response should not be to make more and more oppressive laws, as if the existence of these will somehow alter behaviour. It doesn’t, and it won’t. There may be some laws which do alter behaviour – the drink drive rules have seeped into social consciousness, and the combination of personal loss (license, money, reputation) and public loss (harm to others) results in an effective self-protecting altruism. But that process is consensual – society generally and drivers individually agree that it is, properly, anti-social behaviour to get in a car when drink has been taken. That model cannot be imposed on groups which feel they are outside society, or which get their sustenance and identity from their own alienated micro-cultures. Increasing sentences for knife possession (now four years maximum) or always prosecuting won’t, in these circumstances, stop the offending.

Until it is inevitable that everyone who carries a knife will be nicked the minute they enter public space with it those consequences won’t deter the individual who wants a lethal weapon on his person. Why he wants it, and how that want can be removed is the issue, and is not a problem the CJS can cure. And tabloid rhetoric aside, even a 16-year-old who can cut open human flesh with a shard of steel is not an alien, or a monstrous scion of ‘them’, but one of ‘us’ gone wrong. Righting that wrong needs to start before the court doors open: rejecting demonisation is the first small step.

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