

### The Smokescreen Budget

In the House of Commons Library George Osborne's claim that his is a One Nation budget should ensure its being placed in the Fiction Section.

Low-paid basic workers did not (for political purposes) exist, or had no right to exist, or could live on thin air. Yet it is on these that the world's life finally depends. In the book of Ecclesiasticus, 38, the honour due to the doctor and the intellectual are duly acknowledged. The question is then raised 'whose work sustains the fabric of the world' – keeps its essential life going from one day to another. The answer is the basic worker. It is a twisted society which does not acknowledge and honour that. Osborne's is the budget of a twisted society, as far from reality as is Alice in Wonderland.

When, in a budget speech, a smokescreen is deliberately put in place, the wise will peer underneath to see what realities are being concealed. How is this done?

Osborne used shock tactics. A Tory budget anticipating a living wage of £9 an hour! – enough to distract the attention of the unwary from the nitty-gritty substance!

Yet, even at that point, awkward thoughts might have caused the wary to pause.

One is that this will cost the government nothing.

Another is that, if, at one fell swoop, the government could establish a living wage in the future why was this not done when basic wages were so low as to leave workers living on the margins.

A third is that the target is distant enough, so that, by the time the date is reached, it may amount to no more than a minimum wage arrangement.

A fourth is – what happens to the under-25s?

But the magician waved his wand and some people were taken in – temporarily at any rate, by his magic.

### One Way Austerity

At the beginning of the coalition government's term in office Osborne had said 'we are all in this together' – while reducing the top rate of tax for the wealthy. The underlying reality was shown up in a July 2015 issue of figures from the Office for National Statistics. Last year the poorest families in the U.K. were losing more of their income in tax (of all kinds) than any other income group! The statistics given are these. The poorest fifth of households paid 37.8% of their income in taxes while the richest fifth paid only 34.8% of theirs. Under the Chancellor's leadership the weakest and most vulnerable carry the tax can!

The decision that the Inheritance Tax will not affect those under the £1 million mark, is a device to continue and increase and solidify an unequal society by devious means.

That is so also with the decision to turn grants for poorer students seeking university places into loans. The 'keep uni for toffs' brigade have been hard at work seeking to secure the class-consolidation of power. Here is the comment of Megan Dunn, President of the National Union of Students:

“Cutting maintenance grants would be detrimental to hundreds of thousands of our poorest students who currently rely on them, and could risk putting many people off applying to university. We know that our poorest students are the most likely to be deterred by debt, but it could also affect where students choose to live and which courses to take. This is yet another unreasonable barrier to accessing higher education”

This is a clear illustration that trust in the market advocated by the rich and privileged fails when it comes to their own offspring. They do not see them as being able to stand the heat of the open market and load them with educational, prestigious, old boy (and girl) advantages to give them not just a head start but a body and propulsion advantage to ensure that class counts above merit.

Iain Duncan Smith (giving himself a high self-approval rating belied by the incompetence shown in his inability to get agreed benefits to people when due, pushing them thus to food banks and into the grip of moneylenders) deplores the 'something-for-nothing' culture. But he diverts attention to the weak and vulnerable when major beneficiaries flourish among his own kind. Remnants of feudalism, tax avoidance, subsidies, allowances, low taxes drain resources from the public purse. All this is covered up in order that the moneyed may not be targeted, the Murdoch-smear papers playing their part to keep it so. Gifts of less privileged in the community, if given a chance, could enrich life to greater purpose.

Duncan Smith, as a Christian, might have been expected to give weight to the opening of Psalm 24:

a) 'The earth is the Lord's, with its plentiful resources,  
As is the world and those who live in it'

No one has a right to grab more than a just share of what belongs to God and is provided for all earth's inhabitants – every one created in God's own image and likeness.

The call to human beings is to be trustees of God's purpose and stewards of his creation, in a way which fulfils that purpose. When everything is of grace, the accumulation of possessions in few hands is, in biblical terms, 'robbery'

Jesus said that he came not that people might have an overabundance for some and a scrimped and marginal existence for others but that everyone born should have 'life in its fullness'. Check up on how a lop-sided, unequal society measures up to that.

b) Welfare is a good word. Governments were meant to have a responsible concern for the welfare of every one of a country's inhabitants.

The word 'welfare' has been diminished; those with physical or mental incapacities, or preys to different forms of accident or disease are made to justify their existence and pare down the cost of the support. Jesus took a totally different line.

He and his disciples came across a man born blind. The disciples were taken up with who was to blame for his severe handicap. Jesus taught them to look on his condition recognising the presence of God in the whole of life, the availability of God's grace and the calling to deal graciously with those who experience want. He took that encounter not only as a challenge to heal but as a reminder of the enlargement of human life wherever the response to need is graciously met.

A welfare state is a humanising state. Its loss would reduce the human quality of life. Yet that is what Osborne's policies would achieve. They continue to run against Jesus' short version of life's priorities: 'Love God and *your neighbour as yourself*'.

#### A Harsh, Inhumane Budget

The loss of £9bn a year of tax credits will not be compensated for by other measures. The Resolution Foundation think tank concludes 'many working household will be left significantly worse off'. Jonathan Portes of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research said of the proposed future Living Wage: 'It is misleading to suggest that it will outweigh the credit reductions'.

The Children's Society observes that it will be our youngest who will disproportionately bear the brunt the new, lower income cap.

Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute for Fiscal studies concluded: 'The changes overall are regressive, taking much more from poorer households than richer ones'.

The prophet Jeremiah said to the sons of King Josiah: 'Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy....Is that not to know me? Says the Lord' (22 vv. 15,16)

The poor are precious to God. The public face of love is justice and we are God's chosen agents. Here we have a budget which does not know God.

Ian M. Fraser