

Charity shouldn't begin at home for Save the Children



The state of childhood in Britain is woeful – but poverty is not to blame, whatever Save the Children might claim

The Save the Children advert focuses on families living in 'poverty'. But Britain's problem is an ever more deeply entrenched cultural one, of state-encouraged, if not promoted, ignorance, dependence and cultural degradation

In 1909 the infant mortality rate in the London borough in which my father was born was 124 per thousand: that is to say, one in eight children died before their first birthday. A hundred years later, the national figure was less than one in two hundred.

Since the infant mortality rate is generally taken as being proportional to raw physical need or impoverishment, it might look as though these have been abolished in Britain (there will always be some children who die, of course). So on the face of it, this seems an odd time for the Save the Children Fund to announce that it is mounting a campaign to save the children of Britain – all the more so as there are countries in the world in which the infant mortality rates are similar to those of the East End of London when my father was born.

Since there is an explanation for everything, there is an explanation for Save the Children's announcement: but as we shall see, saving the children has nothing to do with it. The explanation has more to do with the moral, financial and political corruption of our charity sector, in which employment grew by 19 per cent between 2001 and 2010, while employment in the private sector fell by 4 per cent.

First, however, let me state that there are no grounds for complacency about the condition of Britain's children. More than one survey has shown that in many respects they are the worst brought up and unhappiest in the Western world; and while I would not normally place much credence in such surveys, in this case their findings coincide with the most obvious casual observation.

British children are by far the fattest in Europe (three times as many of them as in France are truly obese), and even among the fattest in the world. A very high percentage of them never, or only very rarely, eat a meal at a table with other members of their family – or perhaps I should say household.

Indeed, there is often no table at which they could eat such a meal if it ever occurred to anyone to provide them with one.

When I entered such a home – as I often did as a doctor – I discovered no evidence that cooking had ever taken place in it, beyond reheating of prepared food in the microwave. The children did not so much eat meals as forage or graze, more or less *ad libitum*. One of the most elementary forms of civilised social intercourse was therefore alien to them.

Meanwhile, down the road, there were Indian shops selling fresh vegetables so cheap that you could hardly carry away all you could buy for £10 – the cost of 30 cigarettes. It goes without saying that the homes of which I speak were plentifully supplied with flat television screens, some of them as wide as the sky, and almost always illuminated.

The pattern of child-rearing in Britain is all too often that of a toxic combination of overindulgence and neglect. First a child is bribed into silence, or at least minimal compliance, by being given what it wants; then, when it is old enough to demand rather than request, it does so. A higher proportion of parents in Britain end up frightened of their own children than anywhere else known to me – I never saw it in Africa, where I lived for several years. And it is not only their parents who are frightened of them: who these days dares to tell children to behave themselves in a public place? Old people shrink away from them in fear; I have not seen this in other countries.

About a fifth of our children leave school unable to read or write fluently. This is not the consequence of poverty: on average, at least £50,000 will have been spent on their education. No doubt bad schools, bad teachers, and bad teaching methods have a part to play. But it cannot be easy to be a teacher of children whose parents, or parent and latest lover, will take the child's part in any disciplinary dispute because of their egotistical belief that anything that emerges from them must be above reproach.

Despite the catastrophically low educational level in many parts of this country, there has never been a demonstration, much less a riot, with slogans such as: "We demand that our children be properly taught." Many parents – to judge by their actual conduct – think it is more important for children to have the latest Manchester United strip than that they should be able to read well. Our state does very little to supply the deficiency.

By the end of his childhood, a youngster is considerably more likely to have a television in his bedroom than a father living at home. The combination of family instability and a vulgar, celebrity-obsessed, low-IQ and all but inescapable popular culture (of which, incidentally, the BBC's website for home consumption is clearly a manifestation), means that British children lead the western world in many forms of self-destructive as well as unattractive behaviour.

But none of this is poverty, properly so-called: it is squalor, mental, emotional, moral, psychological, cultural and often, as a result, physical too. But to call it poverty is actually to make it worse, in so far as it misidentifies the problem and fosters the very culture of dependency that brings so much of it about in the first place.

In Africa, I saw nothing like it, at least in the rural areas, neither the neglect nor the overindulgence. And this was in areas of real poverty, where the food supply was uncertain and cigarettes were sold by the puff if they were available at all, and where any fever might lead to death in a day.

I hope I have made it clear that I have no doubt that there is a real problem with childhood in Britain, but poverty of the kind that Save the Children was nominally set up to combat is not that problem. It is an ever more deeply entrenched cultural problem, of state-encouraged, if not promoted, ignorance, dependence and cultural degradation.

But what of Save the Children? The first thing to say about it is that, like so many charities in Britain today, it is not a charity, at least not in the normal sense of the word. It is part of the charitable-bureaucratic complex that is to modern Britain what the military-industrial complex was to Eisenhower's America. Like most bureaucracies, it is there to serve itself.

It spent £88 million on humanitarian assistance in 2009 and £58 million on staff wages (it was far from the worst in this respect: the Child Poverty Action Group spent £1,551,000 of its income of £1,990,000 on wages). In 2009, its chief executive was paid £137,608 which, while not vast by the standards of commercial chief executives, was more than six times the median British wage at the time. This is certainly not what individual donors might think or hope their money is spent on; and it is certainly not what I think charity is. Fourteen of its staff earned more than £60,000, and 150 between £30,000 and £40,000. The "charity" operated a fixed-benefit pension scheme. Its charity clearly began at home.

Save the Children spends about £500,000 a year on efforts in this country; local government makes donations to it of about £500,000. The largest donor to the charity by far in 2009 was the Government, at £19 million. The European Union chipped in with another £12 million, the US government with £11 million. Private donations have been going down as a proportion of the charity's total income (and the expenses of fund-raising are equal to 31 per cent of the funds actually raised), while government contributions have been rising. The chief executive is Justin Forsyth, fresh from having been Gordon Brown's communications and campaigns director.

Large charities in Britain are increasingly in hock to the government and its bureaucratic machinery, with its statist outlook, and even share the same vocabulary. When I looked on one website advertising charity jobs, I found 21 with salaries between £50,000 and £80,000, with titles such as corporate development manager. Is this really what the old ladies who volunteer at charity shops think they are raising money for?

Save the Children is not trying to save the children of Britain, it is trying to save the jobs in the British welfare bureaucracy.

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