

How Britain became a shattered nation



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Where did you grow up?

For the first few years of my life, I lived in a house on a road between a cemetery and a shopping centre. I don't remember much of those years, and I suspect that I was too young to really know where I was living within the city. I now know that there was near full employment around me, and that my rose-tinted recollections of smiling faces fitted the mood of the times. People had never had it so good. Britain had never been so equal. Life chances had never been as fair as they were then, and they were better for more people than they had ever been before, even for those who fared worst.

When I was aged six, in 1974, my family moved to a house close to a major roundabout on the east of the city. In the 1970s, which neighbourhood a child lived in mattered far less for their life chances, and which local school you went to was less important than it is today. House prices varied far less between areas, and children who grew up in private housing and council housing more often played together, largely unaware of whose parents paid rent or had a mortgage.

There were two general elections in 1974. These were becoming turbulent times, but the turbulence had not yet affected my neighbourhood. I later learnt that in the [shipyards of Belfast](#), on the Clyde and on the Tyne, people were losing their jobs. But the car factories in the city of Oxford were still employing thousands. I had no way of knowing that the children in my school year would be the final cohort taken on in such large numbers to work in those factories. The wave of manufacturing unemployment that swept down from the North did not reach Oxford until my later teenage years.



The ravages of the 1980s swept away most well-paying jobs in the city's car factories. Deindustrialisation was masked by gentrification as the two local universities expanded. The cheaper neighbourhood on one side of our roundabout had begun to be gentrified. The more affluent neighbourhood on another side had become unaffordable for most people who worked locally. When the manual work began to dry up, the first to lose their jobs were the parents living on the council estate beside a third segment of the roundabout. Many school-leavers could not find work. The reputation of the council estate began to fall, while estate agents talked in ever more glowing terms about the wonderful houses in the more affluent neighbourhood.

The lives of the teenagers I went to school with became increasingly determined by what side of that roundabout they had grown up on. [Place mattered much more](#) in the 1980s than it had done in either the 1960s or 1970s. The borders of the local primary school catchment areas became more rigidly defined and apparently important. Children played a little less freely across those borders. A tiny few of us went away to university. Almost without exception, those who did so lived in the 'better' segments. I was one of those few.

I came back in my forties to live again in the same city. Recently a local councillor told me that there were over [200 places available on Airbnb](#) in the council estate next to the roundabout. I checked on the website, and at first it appeared he had exaggerated. However, whenever I zoomed in to any part of the estate, a few more Airbnb offers would appear; and not just in the estate, but all around the roundabout. It can be a shock to see that so many of the homes your friends grew up in have been sold on, and bought not by a family to live in, but just to be rented out to tourists.

The Oxford neighbourhood that once had the cheapest private housing – where the majority of homes were originally owned by car-factory workers – is now too expensive for most university academics to afford. Today, it's increasingly inhabited by London commuters,

including political reporters and business folk, many benefiting from being able to work from home while in theory working in London. The most expensive enclave in the neighbourhood has become an investment opportunity for overseas buyers and more up-market buy-to-let landlords. What was once the local pub is today a drive-through McDonald's. Fields that I played in as a child are now fenced off. There are also fewer children playing outside; and fewer children overall. Today, children mix far less with other children.

If you grew up in Britain, think of what has now become of your home neighbourhood. Very few areas of the country have become less divided over time. Those that have tend to be places that have been abandoned by money and are becoming more similar because poverty is rising more uniformly. They are now areas of increasingly widespread and severe deprivation. Conversely, many cities now thought of as affluent have some of the [greatest local social inequalities within their boundaries](#).

I left Oxford at the age of eighteen, and lived for ten years each in Newcastle and Sheffield. The place I grew up in is hardly recognisable to me now. Most buildings are the same, but the city has become a completely different social world.

A similar story can be told of almost anywhere in Britain, but the story of what has happened to Oxford illustrates how nowhere has escaped the crisis of a shattered nation. The city of Oxford is a far more unaffordable, tense, anxious and restless place than it was in my childhood. There are far more students now, many of them coming from overseas and featuring as part of the 'export earnings' of the nation. Those who are not from the United States are normally shocked to see how many homeless people sleep on Oxford's streets. People hardly ever had to sleep on the streets of the city during my childhood.

In 2019 Oxford made national news when it was revealed that the city had one of the UK's highest rates of homelessness as well as of deaths among homeless people. What most shocked local officials was just how many of those who had died had grown up in the city, had gone away, and then come back. What most shocked me was that many were around my age, and I even recognised some of the names of those who had died. In one case, I was able to provide a name when shown a photo of a deceased person the authorities were trying to identify. He had attended my school.

If you live in the UK, it is easy to believe that everything must be getting worse everywhere. But in most of the world, most things to do with human lives and livelihoods are getting better. People are living longer. Life expectancy is rising steadily almost everywhere, except in the UK (and the US). Almost everywhere, infant mortality is falling faster than in the UK. Almost (but not quite) everywhere, people are better off than their parents were. Economic inequality is falling in the majority of countries, and population growth is slowing even in the poorest nations. The social statistics suggest that elsewhere in Europe people have never had it so good, although in the most equitable and advanced European countries folk tend to be sceptical about social progress and are far more vigilant in tracking signs of a lack of progress than we are in the UK. Other parts of the continent have experienced the socio-economic decline of which the UK is an extreme example, but they are the parts that have more often followed the UK policy mantras of privatisation and individualisation. These mantras are now being questioned more intensely than before.



We now expect the global human population to peak in number within the current century. Educational opportunities are widening, and that is linked to the global population slowdown, as well as rising rates of equality in so many countries. There is terrible poverty in much of the world, but it is now more often falling than rising. Other economic inequalities are also falling worldwide, although falls in income inequality, and states becoming more stable and safer, never seem to make the news headlines. I can show students hundreds of statistics from all over the world that suggest we are not travelling towards hell in a handcart. But I can find hardly any social statistics about the UK that are particularly positive, and I spend much more time looking for them than most people do.

Climate change, our great global concern, is now being taken far more seriously than it was a decade or two ago. Carbon emissions per person are lower in more equitable countries as compared to the more profligate unequal ones, and especially the most unequal richest countries. We can see what we have to do to reduce pollution. Much may have been left too late to avoid serious harm, but some good things will be achieved. Even the numbers of

people directly involved in wars have been falling for decades, although we are rightly shocked by each new war. The threat of nuclear war, something we once thought would be almost impossible to avoid, has fallen over recent decades, although it rose again as a concern after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

I am not pessimistic when it comes to global trends. It is just that closer to home the statistics are all a great deal less rosy. As a nation, we have travelled down a road that people in other nations have almost always been far more successful in avoiding. That has brought us to a particular point and resulted in a particular human landscape in the UK, one that is hard to summarise but perhaps can be best described as shattered: people feeling shattered. Hopes shattered. Much of the fabric of society shattered. The ability of our schools to educate our children well, of our social housing system to cope with need, of the National Health Service to care for us, and so much else – all shattered. Many of those previously just coping can no longer cope. Food banks are proliferating. Levels of debt have increased for millions of people, while a very few of the extremely wealthy have seen their riches soar. So many people are feeling shattered by all of this.

As a nation shatters there is a tendency to see each new crack as being the most important issue of the day. Often the retaliatory response is to say that each such event is just part of a global process that happens to be a little worse for the UK than elsewhere. But there comes a time when bad luck strikes too often, in the same place and repeatedly, for all of it simply to be blamed on bad luck. Geographical comparisons show that most places have not been as badly affected by so-called global processes as Britain has. In fact, many of those slow-running processes have had benign or even beneficial effects elsewhere.

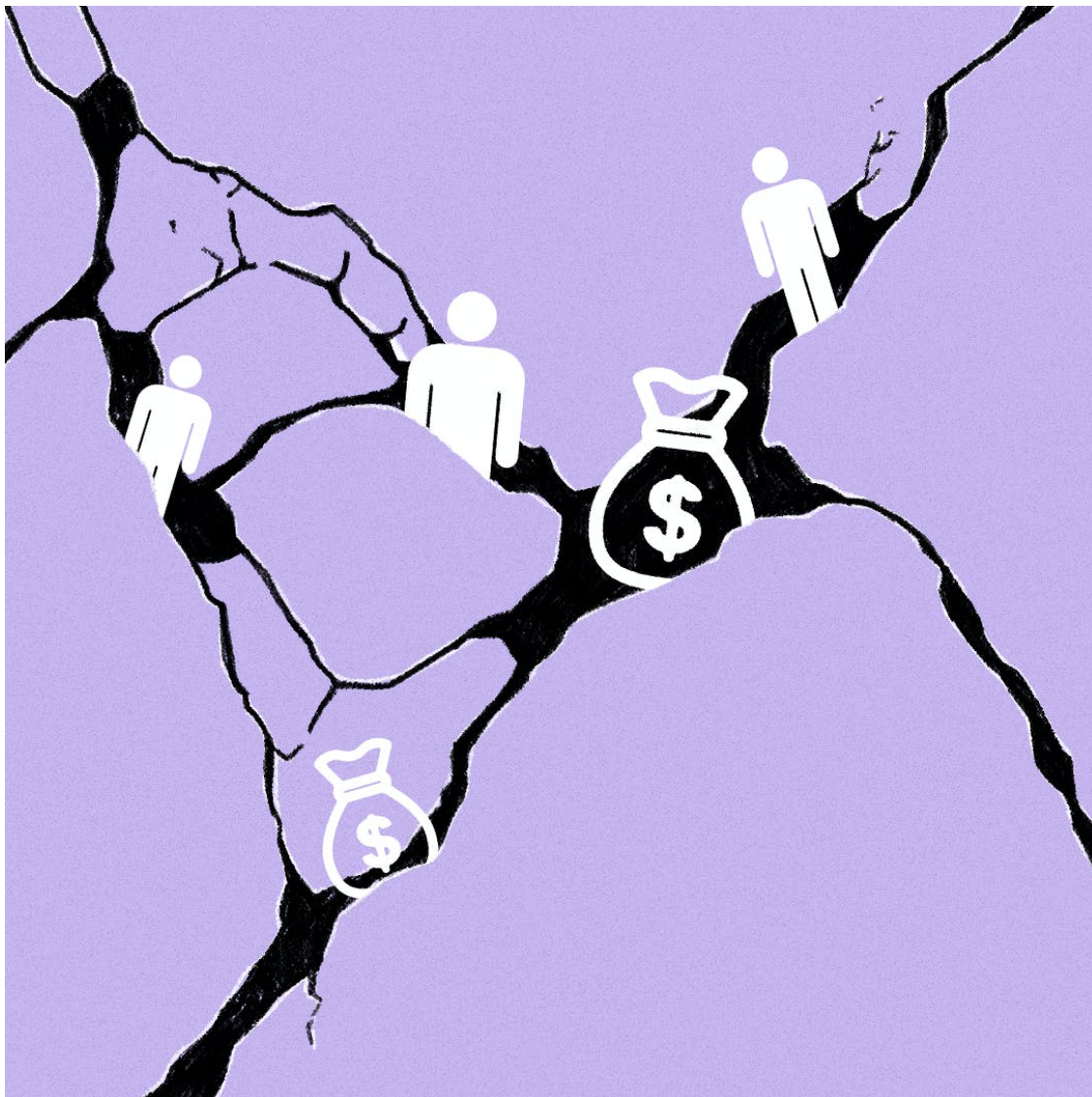
Britain reached its current peak of overall income inequality a very long time ago, in the mid-1990s, and has remained extremely unequal every year afterwards. Ever since then changes have taken place that were not seen elsewhere in Europe. By the time the Labour Party led by Tony Blair came to power in 1997, no other European social-democratic party had placed itself and its policies so far to the right. People joked that Blair was doing things that the right-wing Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher would never have dared to attempt.

At a private dinner in Hampshire in 2002, Thatcher was asked what her greatest achievement had been. She replied: '[Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds.](#)' This may be a little unfair on Blair, and is certainly unfair to many of the MPs in his governments. But, partly in order to outmanoeuvre New Labour, the Conservative Party was subsequently pushed even further to the right. Indeed, in the European Parliament in 2014, British Conservative Party MEPs left the large centre-right European People's Party group to instead ally themselves with a small far-right group that included the German political party Alternative für Deutschland.

What had pushed the Conservatives so far to the right? It was the rightwards shift in Labour during the thirteen years the Conservatives were out of office. New Labour introduced university tuition fees of £1,000 a year in 1998, raised them to £3,000 a year in 2004, and then set the stage for them to be increased again to the highest levels seen worldwide by 2012 (the average US state university fees are second highest). Most importantly, the Labour governments of 1997–2010 did not bring inequality levels down.

Britain went on to suffer more severely from the global economic crash of 2008 than almost any other nation. This was because the Blair government, seeing financial services as paramount and seeking to avoid upfront payments by government, had made financial sleight of hand central to its plans, such as by massively extending what was then called the Private Finance Initiative. New Labour had become reliant on the continued growth of the City of London. Austerity, imposed from 2010 by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government, was [deeper and longer in Britain](#) than anywhere else in Europe. This was partly the result of decisions made by Labour between 1997 and 2010, and not simply because the coalition government, and the Conservative government that succeeded it in 2015, was so callous, although that callousness significantly exacerbated the suffering.

Britain was shattered as a result of the actions of all three main political parties. And while the leaders of all three opposed Brexit in 2016, it still happened, eventually, in January 2020.



The key ramifications of the shattering of the UK are threefold. First, we are growing spatially and socially further apart from each other. Second, the five giants of poverty first identified in the 1940s – want, squalor, idleness, ignorance and disease – are returning in new forms. Third, we have growing internal political divisions. These spreading cracks in the social structure are all classic signs of a failing state.

When a state begins to fail, attempts are made to suggest that claims of its shattering are exaggerations. Typically, a list of apparent problems faced by other countries will be produced whenever their people are said to be doing better than the British: ‘What about suicide rates in Finland?’, ‘What about Germany’s reliance on Russian gas?’, ‘What about the rise in “populism” in the US, Brazil, Hungary, Turkey and Russia?’ This response is so common that it now has its own label: ‘whataboutery’, which [itself dates back to responses to the Troubles](#) in the shattered province of Northern Ireland in the 1970s

One of the functions of whataboutery is to paper over the cracks by diversion and subterfuge. It draws people’s attention away from what they should be looking at by attempting to make false comparisons or confusing the terms of reference. In June 2021 it was revealed that ‘British diplomats [are] being told to change the way they speak about the UK, referring to it as “one country rather than the four nations of the UK”’. In fact, hardly anyone tries to present the UK as a single nation, but the decision by the government to refer to it as such is another illustration of an attempt to paper over the expanding cracks. The United Kingdom is nothing of the sort. It is actually becoming increasingly disunited.

When London-based Conservatives mention ‘this nation’, for them there is only one. At the very least, it encompasses all of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as a sacred indivisible whole. For some of them, Gibraltar (whose residents were allowed to vote in the Brexit referendum), the Falklands and a myriad of other rocks and islands dotted around the world are also part of their imagined British nation. One idea of a nation is of a place or a people worth fighting for. The few shattered remains of a once vast empire are clutched close to the hearts of a particular group of people who would happily send others to fight to defend every remaining offshore holding.

In a shattered state the invisible walls separating areas grow ever higher. But those walls remain mostly invisible because we are repeatedly told that they don’t really exist, and that there is opportunity for everyone out there. Lip service is paid to levelling up, even as most people are being beaten down. A peculiar map emerges as a result, a geography of places with decaying fortunes encroaching on the enclaves of success.

Those enclaves are found in the more affluent streets of London, but also in the country retreats concentrated mostly within rural parts of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, and in pockets close to the roundabout I grew up beside. The few people who have done well for themselves increasingly occupy the enclaves. In my childhood the better-off were more evenly spread out geographically. However, no enclave of affluence is now very far from other places that are going bankrupt.

In May 2022, a stone's throw from Eton College, the borough of Slough was ordered to [sell off all its assets](#) in the wake of being forced to declare bankruptcy over outstanding debts of £760 million. These assets included the town's public libraries, all of its children's centres, its community hubs and what remained of its council housing stock.

The story received very little media coverage. This had already happened in so many other places. By September 2023 the list of places [going bust](#) had even extended to the UK's largest local authority, Birmingham. It was also becoming clear that the same fate was about to befall more and more local authorities facing escalating fuel bills and eviscerated by decades of central-government policy designed to privatise public goods and services. Most secondary schools had been transferred out of local authority ownership long ago, and most primaries more recently. At least they could not be sold off, but they would now have to face the coming storm on their own.

The pillaging of the state has seen the numbers of UK public sector workers – in other words, people working for the public good – plummet from 23 per cent of all those in work in 1992 to just 17 per cent of the much larger total national workforce today. The proportion is redefined over time by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to allow for changes in definitions of who is a public servant. The most recent large fall in the share of public sector employment began under the New Labour government in 2005 and has continued ever since, despite a temporary halt when the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in 2020. Overall, UK public spending as a proportion of GDP fell below that of Spain in the 1980s, and below that of Greece in the 1990s. It was already lower than almost every other Western European nation following the cuts that began in the late 1970s.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that it was only the least democratic of Western European nations that spent less on public goods after 1980: Spain was still recovering from the dictatorship of Franco, and Greece from the junta of the generals. While the UK continues to be an outlier in the paucity of its spending on public goods, both Spain and Greece are now much more democratic and more like the rest of the European mainland in having large public sectors than the UK.

A country's spending statistics are presented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a proportion of GDP. The IMF also reports on what countries plan to spend in the future. The current UK government has said it intends to spend less than almost everywhere else in Europe, even though it will allocate a higher share of its public monies to its military than any other Western European country, and a huge amount to its debt repayments. Here are the percentages for 2023: France and Belgium will spend 55 per cent of their GDP on public services, followed in descending order by Finland, Greece, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany and Spain, and finally both Portugal and the Netherlands at 45 per cent, with the UK way below at only 41 per cent. While the IMF's projection for the UK for 2023 is two percentage points higher than the 39 per cent spent in 2019, that is a reflection of the rising costs of debt repayment and the projected further increase in military spending, rather than representing any rise in spending on public well-being.

The position of the UK is even worse than the numbers above suggest because in recent years its GDP has not risen as much as that of other European countries. Meanwhile the pound has fallen in value. By the first quarter of 2022 the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) was reporting that average real earnings per person in the UK were a massive £11,000 lower than they would have been had the slow upward trend seen through 1990–2008 continued.

You can still find parts of the UK to visit that have picture- postcard looks and which on the surface appear impervious to change. But even there, when you scratch beneath the surface, all is not well. Behind the Regency facades of Chelsea and inside the barn conversions of the Cotswolds there is growing anxiety. Very affluent people now ask me, much more frequently than they used to, what I think will happen when most people realise what has happened to the UK. I do not have a simple answer for them. The decay is clearest in the suburbs, where families now increasingly rent a home that a generation ago they would have owned.

In Middle England neighbourhoods like the one I grew up in, I get asked to give public talks about how people might cope with the latest cost-of-living crisis. In poorer areas, where things have been so bad for so long, there is less of a sense of crisis and more one of bitter resignation. The crisis of 2022/23, as mortgage rates rose, was very much a middle-class affair, affecting almost everyone who had got on the housing ladder in the current century. It was no longer among the poorest where the pain was most concentrated. The children of the winners from Thatcher's Britain are now losing out. They face unprecedented spikes in their energy bills, pay rises below inflation and, if lucky enough to have them at all, the prospect of their private pensions becoming increasingly insecure. That was partly why Liz Truss tried to offer them Thatcher Mark II, and why Rishi Sunak presents a re-spinning of Tony Blair-like enthusiasm. But the deeper the malaise becomes, the more any solutions will need to go in the opposite direction to Thatcherism, and the more the question arises: when will so few benefit from the system, a system that already fails so many, that it ceases to be tolerated?

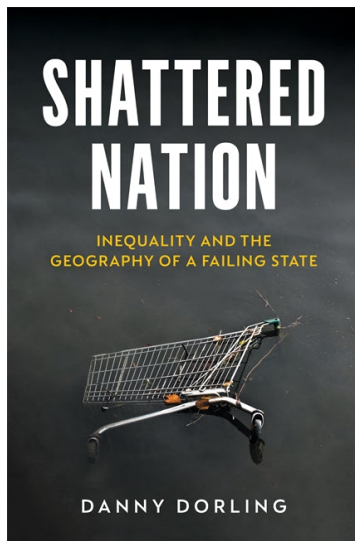
The multiple crises that afflict Britain are worse and have deeper roots than those affecting other European states. The UK is now very likely to be the most economically unequal country in Europe (although until early 2022 it was ranked just slightly more equal than Bulgaria). The repercussions are widespread. It really matters that Britain has the most divisive education system in Europe, tainting our institutions and affecting individuals for life. It matters greatly that the UK has the most expensive and poorest-quality housing, the most precarious and often lowest-paying work for so many people, the lowest state pension and the stingiest welfare benefits. Recently Britain has also experienced the sharpest declines in health in all of Europe, especially in the health of its children. A whole state is being plunged ever deeper into poverty. This is failure. It is not surprising that even the rich are now worried.

As the crisis deepens, geographical inequalities grow and, cruelly, these disparities help to sustain the crisis because they serve to hide the exploitation it involves. The very rich increasingly live apart from the rest of us, leading parallel lives. But so too do the fairly rich, who control most of what is left of the opposition (both within Parliament and the mainstream

media), and who tell us that the only rational alternative to our shattered present is a watered-down version of more of the same.

This book is not utopian. Its core argument is that sooner or later Britain's divisions will have to be addressed because they are now so great that they are becoming unsustainable: too few people now benefit. However, addressing these divisions will not result in a sudden arrival at the sunlit uplands.

Nonetheless, we have been this shattered before, and other states have been too. In every case it took decades to put the pieces back together again. We can choose now either to cultivate hope, so that we have the energy to persevere, or to burn out in exhaustion at the collective trauma that the shattering induces, and allow those who have divided us to continue to do so. This is the choice we face.



Shattered Nation:

Inequality and the Geography of A Failing State

by [Danny Dorling](#)