

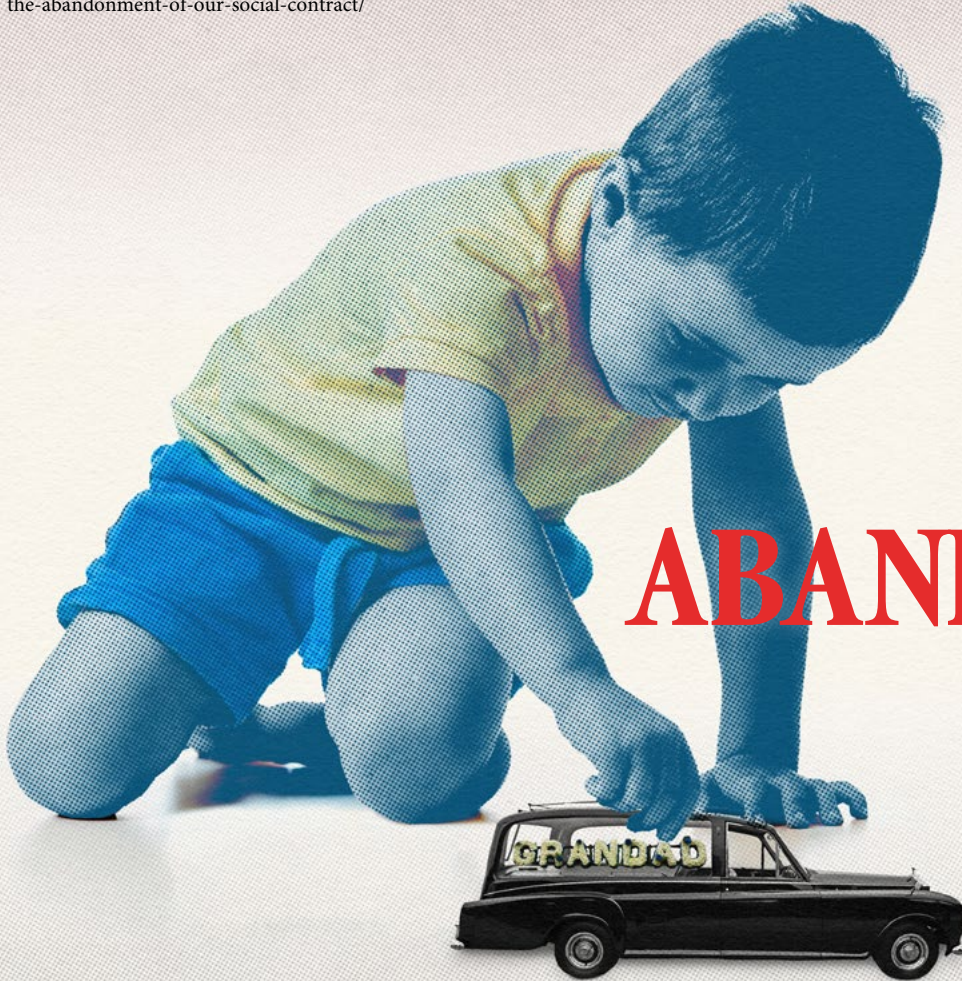
BYLINE TIMES

BYLINETIMES.COM
ISSN 2632-7910

WHAT THE PAPERS DON'T SAY

MARCH 2024 £4.50
FREE FROM FEAR OR FAVOUR

Dorling, D. (2024) From the cradle to the grave: The abandonment of our social contract, Byline Times, 6 March, <https://bylinetimes.com/2024/03/06/from-the-cradle-to-the-grave-the-abandonment-of-our-social-contract/>



From the
Cradle to
the Grave

ABANDONED

“We are a poor, sick country with some rich, healthy people in it – and that will take a long time to fix”

Byline Times investigates how rising social inequality has destroyed our social contract – and the difficult political choices ahead
Sir Michael Marmot, Professor Danny Dorling, Andrew Kersley, David Hencke, and Caolan Robertson

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:



The Art of Revolt

The Lasting Resonance of the Women's Movement

Aita Ighodaro

The Rise and Rise of Donald Trump

America's Need for Chaos and Control at Its Core

Bonnie Greer

Free Speech Isn't Funny

The Comedians Afraid of Lawyers

Jemimah Steinfeld



From the Cradle to the Grave

THE MISSING QUESTION AT THE HEART OF THE ABANDONMENT OF OUR SOCIAL CONTRACT

Children are dying younger and growing up shorter, while the elderly's last years are more painful and desperate than they once were. We have normalised the life of our society falling apart, writes **Danny Dorling**

From the Cradle

The Sun newspaper broke the story of two-year-old Bronson Battersby in January. He was found starved to death curled up next to his father Kenneth. Kenneth had died of a heart attack. He was 60. The two were last seen together by a neighbour 14 days earlier. Five days later, the BBC reported that the local Police and Crime Commissioner had suggested any speculation about their demise was “unhelpful”.

A week on, other news reports suggested that, in places like the town in which Bronson and his father died – Skegness in Lincolnshire – with so much poverty and so many chaotic lives, it is often only local social services that “pick up the pieces”.

These reports pointed out that there was only one social worker for every dozen children known to be very vulnerable nationally, and that those social workers had a great deal more to do than just keep an eye on that dozen. They explained that social work is becoming harder as other services such as GPs withdraw; as deprivation rises; and because the starting salary for social work is only £24,000.

No one asked why the pieces were

falling apart.

An inquiry was initiated to ascertain whether any failings could be ascribed to individual professionals and ‘missed opportunities’. These kinds of inquiries are always limited in their scope.

The reality is that the death of someone like Kenneth in Britain in 2024 is now treated as not uncommon. But there was a time when our health was improving. When poverty was falling. When lives were less chaotic. When fewer children and adults died each week than die now in England.

Two months before Bronson Battersby's slow death, the President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health raised the alarm. No one listened.

Dr Camilla Kingdon was reacting to the latest release of the National Child Mortality Database which showed a dramatic increase in deaths among children aged one to four. “Behind this awful data,” she said, “is a whole raft of deteriorating child health outcomes and the clear driver is rising child poverty in the UK.”

She was speaking, in effect, to an empty room. This was not an issue deemed of importance anymore. Her other statements on other issues were reported in the press, but not her warning on the deaths of children in the UK.

Death rates have risen among children of all ages, and all social classes, but most of all for those who are living in poor areas – and especially for younger aged children like Bronson.

The greatest rise has happened in the most recent 12 months, between 2022 and 2023.

But so what? We are used to these stories now. Many of us can't remember a time when there was good news. ‘Tragic but inevitable’ appears to be the default response. As well as the sense that ‘at least it is mostly only happening in the poorest of areas’. Except that child mortality is now rising everywhere, in all social groups. Rare events make headlines. Mundane bad news does not.

To the Grave

If the reaction is to keep your children close and hope this is never the fate of anyone you know, let alone care about, then you also don't want to think about the last year of your own life. Or about what it might be like for your parents or grandparents if they are still alive in their last year of life. Not now things have become so bad.

We know the NHS has been falling apart for as long as most of us can remember. We know there is very little left of adult social care or of those ‘meals on wheels’ that used to be delivered. We've heard there is a triple-lock on state pensions, but we know – or should know – that other benefits were removed during the past decade to mean that even average pensioners became no better-off. That was all before the price of heating your home and feeding yourself rose so fast. Even with inflation falling, prices are still rising much faster than before, even now.

The National Life Tables for the UK were released five days before Bronson and his father were found dead.



‘We don’t ask why we allowed our welfare state, which once protected us from the cradle to the grave, to no longer function at either end of our lives, let alone in between.

Why?’

These were the latest such statistics since 2021, but we don’t look at them anymore. It is no longer news.

The tables showed that life expectancy in the three years to 2022 was 78.6 for men and 82.6 for women. It had been 78.7 and 82.7 previously. It was falling partly because the period before included a pandemic-free year. A decade earlier, in 2012 to 2014, men lived more than 79 years and women 82.8.

By 2020 to 2022, the national UK mortality rates of two-year-old boys like Bronson, according to the new National Life Tables, had risen to 15 per 100,000 (its highest level since 2015 to 2017). In all of British recorded mortality history, it has never risen by as much as it was reported to have risen most recently.

The National Child Mortality Database figures are even more up to date. And they are worse. So we already know that it will be higher again when the Life Tables are next updated, probably two years from now.

Despite this, we don’t ask the most important question of all: *why?*

We ask about individual infectious

diseases. About the pandemic. The competence of professionals. The supposed fecklessness of individuals. But we do not ask why, after a century of progress, more children are now dying young in Britain today.

We don’t ask why the heights of our children have been falling, beginning for those born in 2005, who were hardly any taller than those born five years before them. British children’s height had been rising for more than a century. So why are children in Britain now shorter – when child heights are still rising in France and only stalled for a short time in Germany (and only then in the brief years when hundreds of thousands of children from war-torn Syria were allowed in as refugees)?

We don’t ask why we are behaving like the only other country in the rich world to see the same thing occurring: why are we copying the United States?

We don’t ask why child poverty rates are now higher in every region of England than in Northern Ireland or Scotland. Or why the two largest political parties in England now support the two-child

policy on benefits – condemning a majority of English children (56%) with two or more siblings to go hungry several times a month last year. In England, we don’t seem to know that in Scotland this is not the case – or that the special extra Scottish Child Payment was increased in November 2022 so that no children north of the border need go cold or hungry – or be so stunted in height in the future.

We don’t ask why we allowed our welfare state, which once protected us from the cradle to the grave, to no longer function at either end of our lives, let alone in between. Why?

I can see why. There comes a time when you might as well just give up. Accept that our last years of life are likely to come earlier now and be more painful than they were in the past. That our children will be fed poorer diets, be shorter, and live lives a little more desperate than before. It is understandable to accept that hope is dead and all we can do is to try to look after ourselves and our families.

Or we can pick ourselves up and say: this far and no further. That we still do have a society. That there were people who did knock on Bronson Battersby’s door. That millions of people have now seen the photo taken of him before he died.

But we also know the situation could get much worse. And so we must ask the one question we are most afraid to.

Why?

Danny Dorling is the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at Oxford University and the author of *Inequality and the 1%*