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The geography of stupidity: From where do all the bad ideas come?

Danny Dorling, Second Draft, as submitted, 15th February, 2012

Abstract

The 30-year rule governing the release of Cabinet papers means that the British people only learned of a covert 1980s policy to manage the decline of northern England in early 2012. We can only guess at what is really being said behind closed doors today. There are some clues in a series of newspaper reports published in 2012 and in the social backgrounds and professed beliefs of the current Cabinet. They point to what might be the real intention behind reforms in education, health, housing and social security.

What will the release of cabinet papers in 2042 reveal about the real intentions of the British cabinet as regards welfare reform in the UK in 2012?

As 2011 turned into 2012 the minutes of confidential discussion at the highest level of British government were released. This is how things are done in Britain. Thirty years after the event the electorate are allowed to know what the people they elected were discussing. Their words are released, along with those of those unelected members of the cabinet. In Britain the Prime Minister can simply co-opt un-elected members he or she puts into the Lords directly to the top of government in Britain. Whether cabinet members are elected to safe seats (having often secured such seats through cronyism) or were unelected but had secured a seat in the Lords through cronyism, they are then permitted to debate, in secret, all our futures.

Writing on January 1st The Merseyside comic and commentator, Alexei Sayle, explained how government minister Geoffrey Howe's advice not to "waste money" on Liverpool following the riots in Toxteth in 1981 had been taken up (Sayle 2012). Other ministers supported Howe. Michael Heseltine, in his ultimately unsuccessful bid for the premiership made a pitch for trying to aid Liverpool. Given the subsequent economic and social fate of Liverpool, in hindsight Heseltine was either incompetent or he was just pretending to care (Sayle, 2012).

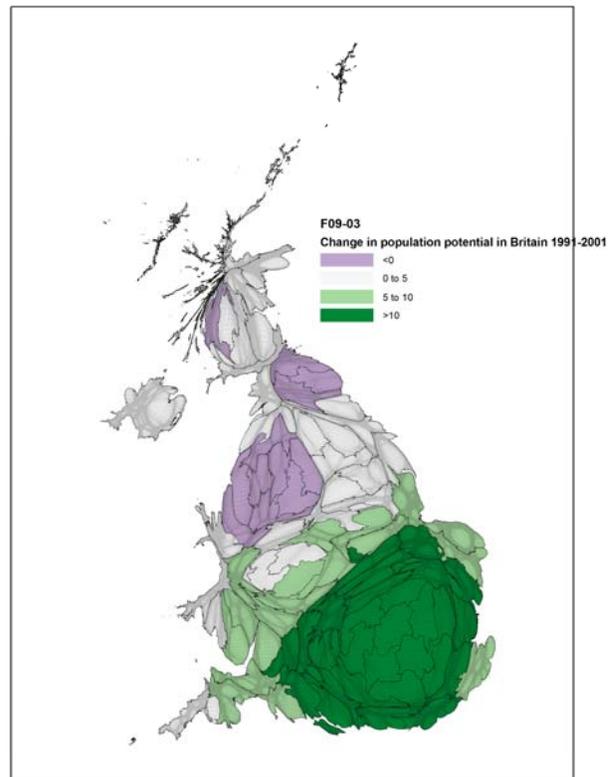
Heseltine is best remembered for some scandal over a helicopter arms contract and a flower show he arranged in Liverpool, which he called a festival. He is currently the Regional Growth Tsar. In February 2011, it was reported that on Sky TV "Michael Heseltine talks about the UK economy, and how the coalition government can 'help the small people'". When his comments were uploaded to YouTube, under the video was written: "Nice of him to think of small businesses as 'small people', instead of big businesses that have covert budgets for backhanders.... sorry, lobbying." (Sky News, 2011) On the flower show, he arranged back in 1984, Sayle helpfully points out:

"After the festival closed, the site was abandoned and remains so until this day. I drive past it on the way to my mother's house and it is a rather lovely spot right on the edge of the turbid river. Just as the prairie is coming back to the abandoned neighbourhoods of Detroit, so the festival site seems to be returning to the kind of broad-leaf English forest that has not been seen since the Industrial Revolution, an Arcadia where nymphs, shepherds and shelf-stackers from the Park Road Tesco's, Europe's largest urban superstore, frolic on Midsummer's Eve."

If we had known for the last thirty years that what many of us suspected at the time was true, we *would* have been less misled, we possibly *could* have been more useful. Perhaps you knew just how deceitful that last government was, but if you were young and optimistic back then it was hard to imagine that they were being that deceitful. That is why it made headlines in January 2012 that ministers had discussed managed decline in the early 1980s. So, a little older and wiser, what should we learn from the deceit that began in such earnest at the start of the last Conservative period of administration when, publically, ministers said they would invest, while privately they counseled the decline of the North – the course that was actually taken?

One way to know that the North declined and, in particular, which parts of the North declined, is to look at how something as simple as population numbers changed, but not to look at how those changed in a simple way. Instead consider how many people are close to each place, how much potential demand for services there is in each place, and how many people are there to provide those services, work and markets. The way this has traditionally been measured is to calculate a statistic called population potential. For each place in the country sum up the population of the entire country, dividing the effect of each individual by the physical distance between them and that place. Once you then look at how that statistic is changing you have a smoothed summary of how the population has changed.

The population cartogram (right) shows the change in population potential as it was measured between the 1991 and 2001 censuses. The distribution is shown on a population cartogram so it is possible to see how many people have been effected. The dark green blob of growth is the South East of England. In contrast, Merseyside, Manchester, Tyneside and Clydeside are all shown in purple as people moved away and as decline set in.



Source: Figure 9.3 of Dorling (2012)

I include the map here as, again in hindsight, looking back on what happened in the decade after the 1980s, from a decade again on, the picture begins to look clearer and clearer. It helps to have new kind of maps to draw these statistics on, but it also helps to look back on these numbers knowing more precisely what was being said behind closed doors.

So, what might be being said behind closed doors today? Of course, we can only guess, but if we are a little older and wiser our guess can be based on less naivety than before. All the stories which follow are taken from newspaper reports which were published in December 2011. This is what is happening in public. What is happening in private can only be surmised given clues such as those which follow.

In England, Education Secretary Michael Gove announced the reintroduction of many more secondary modern schools on December 11. This was not the way he put it, he was talking about turning many current comprehensive into Grammars and denying parents any right to object but, for every new Grammar, three of four other secondary schools become Secondary Moderns in all but name (Millington, 2011)

In Britain, on the issue of poverty on December 9th, Work and Pensions Minister Ian Duncan Smith said that “the goal of social justice was [merely] to put people on the first rung of social mobility” (Wintour and Lewis 2011). I have added the word ‘merely’ in brackets as I think it helps explain the poverty of aspiration that Ian has. Talking to a Telegraph newspaper journalist a few days earlier Ian said “Giving more money to poor families will not help the issue of child poverty because feckless parents will spend it on themselves” (Winnett 2011).

Across the UK, on jobs, it was predicted (on December 27th) that 2012 would be the toughest year yet for unemployment, with the numbers officially registered as out of

work rising to “2.85m by the end of 2012” (Groom, 2011). In reality millions more than that will have no work. These are all people who would like work, but for various reasons are not allowed or choose not to claim benefits, including possibly because it is better to pretend to be self-employed and claim tax credits while you still can, than job seekers allowance. The numbers saying they are self-employed always tend to rise when unemployment rises, masking the real rise in joblessness.

On housing, ministers announced a series of plans to reduce the housing benefits being paid to people, often in work, who could not afford their rents, especially those living in more expensive areas. Possible outcomes of these changes would include tenants being forced to move to cheaper areas, or into homelessness, to crime or into great debt to pay the rent. However, there was another possible outcome in that the housing benefit changes would increase the incentive to sub-let property without telling the landlord, possibly at very high densities of people (several per room in some parts of London). At the very end of December 2011 ministers announced they planned to criminalize such activity which would, of course, not stop it, but would drive it into even more secrecy. The poor within London were about to become even more over-crowded, more marginalized and less protected by any laws.

And, finally, in the area of health, a Bill to fully enshrine was the government call competition and what its opponents call privatisation, was working its way with very little effective impedance, through the Houses of Commons and Lords through the end of 2011 and into 2012. On the 20th December, in a key academic paper, published in the

British Medical Journal it was explained that what was being attempted through this, and most other so called social reforms in Britain that year, was an attempt to turn British society with its social-state to a more anti-social-state, a more North American dog-eat-dog nightmare. This had not been possible before, the paper's authors explained, because:

“In America, the rich could never fall to the bottom of the ladder, because that position was already taken. African Americans faced persistent and widespread discrimination. There was no veil of ignorance. Europeans knew they could go to bed rich and wake up poor, but a rich (and, by extension, white) American could be confident that they would never wake up black.”

(McKee and Stuckler, 2011)

What McKee and Stuckler did not go on to explain, but what was in part implicit, was that to achieve this in Britain a new set of people have to be made confident that they would not wake up black, or more diffusely, living in the North of England, or Wales, or Scotland or Northern Ireland, or in a household reliant on state services and schools and hospitals in the South East of England. But how would they do this? The answer is they could do it because they were those people.

It is worth taking a closer look at British government ministers today. Take Michael Gove. He's the Member of Parliament for Surrey Heath, a constituency the very name of which reveals who will tend to walk into his surgeries. Surrey Heath is the area just to the

North and East of Woking and Guildford. Michael left the state education sector at a young age to attend private school, he went on to Oxford University where he joined the Conservative party, barely out of childhood. He became a journalist and “did well”. He regularly attends church (C of E) in Kensington. He is estimated to be worth at least £1 million.:

“A self-proclaimed neoconservative and former journalist, Michael Gove still writes a weekly column for the Times, which pays him £5,000 a month. Gove has boasted that it takes him an hour a week to write it. This makes his hourly wage more than £1,100 - 127 times higher than the average salary in his constituency, Surrey Heath. He tops this up through contributions to other titles, including Scotland on Sunday and Building Magazine. Gove is a signatory to the Henry Jackson Society, a "project for democratic geopolitics" that advocates a proactive approach to spreading democracy, by military intervention if necessary.” (Shackle et al., 2009)

Or take another minister; look at Ian Duncan Smith for instance. Although he was once unemployed he was never at any risk of having to live in poverty himself. His wife’s fortune prevented that. I could carry on through the two dozen Cabinet ministers who are millionaires, or the high numbers who appear unusually religiously driven, the particular right-wing Christian groups which were recruiting in certain elite universities at the time these young men were impressionable, the tendency for their spouses to be from richer families (most ministers, including the Prime Minister, have ‘married up’). But I won’t go further here, save to say that there is a pattern, and it’s the pattern of where the bad ideas come from – a small, insular, self-referential group, whose exposure to normal life has been severely curtailed.

Of course, the same criticism of insularity could be said of academics working in universities and writing in peer reviewed journals, but that fact that most university academics come from such a much less cloistered environment as do those at the top of the coalition government of 2012 illustrates just how very isolated and unusual those at the top now are. This is especially true of the elite of the Conservative party today. A party which in the recent past widened its doors a little to include rich women (Mrs Thatcher), and a rich man who had not been to university (Mr Major), but which today has a smaller more token set of representatives of widening participation in right-wing politics.

One effect of the isolation of current Conservative ministers from the population as a whole is that they found it very hard, while in opposition, to appeal to enough voters to be able to form a majority government. It was as a consequence of this that in May 2010 the coalition with the Liberal party had to be arranged. Interestingly it was disproportionately those Liberal MPs who were most similar to Conservative cabinet ministers in terms of personal financial fortunes (and other attributes) who were allowed to become the few initial Liberal cabinet ministers. Many other Liberal MPs have a slightly more normal background, but they are then very unlikely to be allowed to sit round the cabinet table (at least initially before a series of wealthy Liberal MP resignations).

So, in thirty years' time what are we likely to read about what the cabinet in 2011 were discussing? On education did they talk about how too many young adults were being allowed into universities and say that it was essential to cut the numbers, but that they

should not announce this – simply force universities to charge so much that fewer could go? All their talk about social mobility was mostly talk about just allowing a few extra of the very poorest of children into the most ancient of elitist old universities. Did they ever mention secondary moderns and, if they did argue over that, was it simply over what name to give those schools in future (rather than the principal)?

On poverty, when their own officials told them how fast poverty was rising, especially poverty among children given all the specific cuts being made to benefits that effected children, did they say in Cabinet, “yes we know our two political parties signed up to end child poverty but of course we also know we don’t believe a word of that, poverty will always be with us, we can try and reduce it for those we label the ‘deserving poor’ but let us carry on pretending that we care in general? In an age of austerity, apart from identifying a tiny handful of poorer children to pull up into university ‘bursary’ schemes, the rest will simply have to tighten their belts”.

On jobs were the words “a price worth paying” uttered at any point around the Cabinet table in 2011, or some similar form of those words if (at any other point) any minister had suggested that perhaps there was a need to reduce incomes at the top and help create work for the millions? That there were simply not enough jobs available because too much of the wage bill went to the top. If those words or words like them were not uttered why does government behave, though its actions, as if they were? I very much suspect instead, that if any mention was made of curtailing excess incomes, then the retort was almost always “Communism was defeated in 1989”.

On housing, did the ministers (between themselves in private) discuss that their policies would lead to a return of mass private rented housing, to a few “efficient” landlords becoming rich on all these rents, but overall standards falling for many? Housing prices were falling in most of the country, but rising rapidly around the Notting Hill first homes and Cotswold second homes of many ministers. One Conservative MP earlier in the year had talked of how people had never had it so good, as interest rates were so low. He sounded as if he didn’t need a mortgage himself and as if he thought it was mortgages that the masses had, not realizing that only the best-off third of households can now aspire to such debt. Did ministers really believe landlords would lose out if housing benefits were reduced? I don’t think they were really in favour of rent control.

And, on health, did ministers talk with admiration of the profits that companies in the United States could make it offering non-socialised health care? Maybe they did or maybe they were more careful with their words, fearing leaks from members of the opposite political party when they came to fight an election against each other, or maybe a pact for 2015 had already been formed? However, they can only have been going along with the privatisation of the NHS because, in their heart of hearts they believed that was right. It was such an electoral liability no other explanation made any sense as 2011 drew to a close and the New Year started. Maybe this is what they went into politics for?

We can’t know what really goes on. It is secret. All bad ideas are formed in secret, not open to scrutiny, not having to be defended. The new coalition government of 2010 had

no popular mandate, no agreed manifesto that had been put to the people. It was formed by a series of mostly secret meetings and continues, in the great British cabinet tradition, to work in secret. To date those secrets are being kept secret. There are appears no great dissent between the two many parties in charge. Not a single MP on either side as reigned over the deals being made. The coalition has announced that there will be no election until 2015, so its lack of respect for voters is not secret.

The idea that all this is fine, that it is ok to work in secret, comes from people who have lived their lives sheltered from others, going to schools that others are not allowed into, being educated in universities with high stones walls built around them, joining clubs and social circuits with high degrees of exclusivity. Meeting the public, but never really having a meeting of minds with them. Treating their constituents rather like a Victorian doctor would treat his charity patients – objects to be pitied and cared for, but not really to be consulted.

Government consultation is with a tiny number of favored experts, those whose ideas are already favored. They are occasionally named when a minister announces some grand plan – “and thanks to Professor X for working out all the figures that make me think this is a good idea but which, of course, I cannot share with you”. There are more Tsars, more people inside “the tent” more talk again of being “one of us”, the clever people, technocratic, neither left nor right, but ‘able’, and there are more secrets.

So, don't judge them by what they say, or believe them when they labeled something as "welfare reform". Judge them simply by what they do and try to work out what they want to achieve from that. In this environment reform rarely means 'to improve by alteration'. Welfare rarely means 'Health, happiness, and good fortune', it more often means 'scrounger'.

Why for instance, might one minister, Francis Maud, have announced that there would be no future census in Britain after 2011? It cannot have been to save money, as the cost was not until the build-up to 2021. There was no consolation before that announcement. Is it because he wanted a private credit reference agency to be given more powers to record information about people to sell to government, or is it that he didn't think government needed much information about the population because in a free market schools and hospitals are not planned, they were built if there is demand from paying pupils and patients?

I don't know the answer.

I just know that we are not being told the truth.

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