



The wreckers

The crises which have engulfed this government should not blind us to the fact that the Conservatives are supremely successful at what they are best at, argues *Danny Dorling*



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AS A CHILD I used to make sandcastles whenever I could get to a beach, which was usually just once a year in the summer. The beach was most often in Wales: Whitesands bay, on St David's head. It is a very good beach for making castles. The sand is just about the right texture and there is a clean stream. During the summers of the 1970s, hundreds of families would camp in the valley above the beach. They still do today. Each morning the children would run down to the sea. And there, newly cleaned by the tide, was a flattened beach upon which to build new sandcastles.

It takes a certain degree of competence to make a good sandcastle. To make a great sandcastle requires much more than that. It requires teamwork. No single child working on their own can make a series of sandcastles on a beach that people stop and stare at in wonder and say: "How were they ever made to look like that?" Often a few adults, secretly wishing they were still children, will have played a part (it helps to have some bigger spades). But for the best results, to build a sand sculpture of hundreds of small castles and outbuildings, with the stream winding through them and much else besides – and to do this all before the tide comes in – requires great cooperation with many other builders and the spreading of competence as children learn from each other.

Very occasionally there was a child who did not like to share, or a small group of such children egging each other on, and they would wait until no one was looking and then try to knock the castles down. I never really understood their motivation, why they felt the need to destroy, why they hated what so many others had made by working well together. But, in just a few minutes, a tiny few could destroy what it had taken a much larger number of others to build up over many hours. Smirking and for some odd reason satisfied, the wreckers would leave a wasteland behind.

As I grew up and watched the Conservatives tear down so much of the industry of Britain, so much of the welfare state, and so much solidarity, I was often reminded of the look on the faces of some of those aberrant, angry, antisocial children. It was hard to work out what might drive someone to take apart what others have so carefully built up in a society and to replace it with nothing but a wasteland. What pleasure could you get from doing that? And then I began to realise that they thought they were actually making something through their destruction. They were showing that cooperation was folly. And they were convincing themselves at least that they were more powerful and more successful; destined to have their way.

Essentially, their policies promote division, competition and fear in place of the norms of cooperation and coordination of provision we see elsewhere in Europe. And yet, they have a reputation for competence, for being 'a pair of safe hands' as it were, and continue to do so in spite of the chaos that we can see all around us today. So, while the U-turns, the bungled general election in 2017 and the mishandling of Brexit certainly display incompetence, attempts to portray the Conservatives as such ignore the party's undeniable success.

The Conservatives in Britain are the most successful right of centre party in Europe, not just in having been in power so many times and for so long, but in having successfully pursued the most right-wing agenda of any mainstream European party. During the 1980s and 1990s they succeeded in changing hearts and minds. They were to transform the UK from being one of the most equitable countries in all of the continent in the 1970s, to the country which now consistently tops the OECD league table for income inequality in Europe. A league table shift of such great magnitude does not happen by accident.

For a time, the Conservatives succeeded in deflecting Labour away from seeing issues such as inequality as





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so crucial. Only a decade or so ago, the huge disparity between the super-wealthy and the rest was portrayed by key Labour figures as “not a great problem, so long as the rich pay their taxes”.

On education too, the Conservatives have been remarkably successful in shifting the parameters of the debate. In no other European country is so much money spent to give an unfair advantage to such a small number of children as the money spent on private schools in the UK. In every area of social life, Conservatives promote evaluative voluntary individualist logic as the alternative to generous omnipresent ordered delivery. On their watch, pre-school education became a private business opportunity; state schools were progressively underfunded and selection at age 16 was introduced via academies.

They have continued to prioritise grammar schools because each grammar school creates so many losers for each winner. Their mentality assumes that only a few can win and most people deserve to be losers; grammar schools are especially dangerous because they imply that the future winners can be identified in early childhood through a test! The Conservatives repeatedly decimate further education and have turned higher education into a marketplace with loans for the many and free entry for the few. Those few who now go to university essentially for free are mostly their own children who will emerge with no student debt thanks to their affluent parents paying their fees upfront.

On housing, the Conservatives have determinedly destroyed – through right to buy, stock transfers and a lack of funding – much of our social provision. One in four children in England now lives in a home from which they can be evicted with just two months’ notice at the whim of their private landlord. Conservatives fix the housing market, constantly intervening in it to prop it up.

George Osborne’s various ‘help-to-buy’ schemes now leave future governments with the most enormous financial liability should house prices fall by more than 5 per cent (a relatively mild scenario given that Mark Carney, governor of the Bank of England, has predicted falls of 30 per cent could be possible). Those schemes were introduced to mask what was happening to the majority who could never get a mortgage to buy a home. Osborne’s measure of success was house prices. The higher they were, the better he thought he was doing.

On health, Conservatives succeeded in moving the UK from being one of the best ranked in the world in the 1960s and 1970s through to one of the worst countries in Europe for health outcomes after their period of hegemony. The UK used to have one of the very best rates of child health in the world. However, by 1990, following 11 years of Tory underfunding, six countries in Europe had lower neonatal mortality rates than the UK, but that was just the start of the decline. By 2015 the UK ranked 19th for neonatal mortality across Europe. Most recently the situation has become far worse, as infant mortality in the UK has risen year after year from 2015 onwards. Nowhere else in Europe has it risen.

Similarly, but for separate reasons, overall life expectancy across the UK peaked in 2014 and has fallen since. Again, nowhere else in Europe has a record of change as bad as this. And again, such an extreme record does not happen by chance. It requires a huge amount of work to shift a country from being so successful in terms of comparative health outcomes, to so unsuccessful over such a short space of time. They are indeed competent – at making life much worse for most people.

How should Labour respond? How do you respond to wreckers who have such a different view of what is right and fair and decent?

Labour's answer on education is to offer a National Education Service, which is laudable, but which has echoes of the 1940s in its title, implying that Whitehall operating benignly from above will somehow create a situation in which your child – and since the 1980s it's all about 'you and your family' – will prosper. If it's all about *you* and if *you* don't have children, or if you have the money to live in the good catchment area, or send your children private, then evaluative voluntary individualist logic tells you to vote Tory. In fact, for your children to get ahead, you need less spent on the education of the 'competitor' children or grandchildren. A very large minority of the British population have been taught not to share well in recent decades. Because of this it is perhaps not surprising then that in 2019, around 40 per cent of adults have still been saying in opinion poll after opinion poll they are happy to lend their support to the Conservatives.

In the face of Tory individualist logic, Labour needs to be far bolder. Working with Michael Davies recently I wrote a paper for the Progressive Economy Forum titled *Jubilee 2022: Writing off the student debt*. In it we explained why it was both right and practical for Labour to include a promise in the next election manifesto to cancel the vast majority of outstanding university student debt for all those students who went to university in 2012 or thereafter. The policy makes good economic sense as well as being fair. And, in a country where half of all young women now go to university, and where people have been made to think so individualistically, it also makes brilliant political sense. Almost everyone who went to university between 2012 and 2018, and those who will go in 2019, 2020 and 2021 (and those thinking of going in future, and their families) would have an obvious extra incentive to vote Labour at the next general election – as would their parents and grandparents – but only if Labour promises to cancel most of the outstanding unfair debt.

We don't just need to unravel the recent errors of Conservatives. That is just a first step to make a promise that if you vote Labour it will be as if the introduction of £9,000 a year fees by David Cameron and Nick Clegg never happened. Labour also need to offer something so much more enticing than a 'national service'. I have many ideas, but so do you, and so do many others. You don't build a good set of sand castles on the beach alone; and you always have to be wary for those who would try to destroy what you have made. *Jubilee 2022: Writing off the student debt* is a small castle that I built recently with Michael and the help of a few other experts on student finance, I'm quite proud of it. Would you like to make a castle to go next to it? Perhaps suggest a better pre-school policy or housing policy, to add to all the beautiful landscape of all the proposals that are already being suggested?

On housing, Labour has to stop being polite. Conservative policies are taking a huge human toll. In early 2019, as the head teacher of what had been Marston Middle School in Oxford in the 1980s, Roger Pepworth, explained so clearly after the death of a former pupil who had most recently slept rough on the streets of Oxford: "I do not have solutions. I only know that the dreams that

Sharron, a lovely child, had until her death, have perished in the wreckage of an austerity programme that has literally killed her and her like."

Sharron's death will not be forgotten in Oxford for a long time to come. Decades ago the Conservatives dismantled the social provision that, had it been in place, could have helped Sharron when she was a young girl in the 1980s. The Tories ensured later that when Sharron most needed help as an adult, it was not there. Millions live in fear of how they will pay the rent or cope with the mortgage payments. Millions more live with the misguided belief that the homes they own are worth a fortune now and will fund a luxury retirement for them (as long as they keep voting Conservative). But top Tories don't have mortgages. They buy and sell in cash and have property around the world – they dupe other people into voting for their party. Top Tories care not one jot that homelessness rises when they are in power.

In the UK today, even just within London, we still have more bedrooms within residential homes than there are people who need a bed. We have not built enough where the need is great enough; but the fastest way in which we will better house ourselves again is to repeat what we did for the whole period from 1921 to 1981; for those 60 years, each year, we better used the stock we had than the year before. We built more but more importantly each year we shared better. Growing income *equality* meant that the rich did not buy second homes so often. People increasingly moved into housing of the size their families needed; and a third of

all housing was allocated on the basis of need, not greed. History will repeat, but the mechanism will be different in future. On Whitesands Bay each summer today new and different sandcastles are being built with each new tide.

The solution for all of our public services in future will not be a return to the 1970s. That tide went out long ago, and many tides have come in since to wash the solutions of those days away. Just like social policy of the past, new castles are made of sand, they always melt into the sea – eventually. You just have to keep on building more. The bet-ter health system of the future will not simply be a return to what we had before the 2012 privatisation act. To be better, it has to be different.

For the last four decades, there have been more social wreckers on the policy beach than social builders, but that time has ended: evaluative voluntary individualist logic has had its day. The alternative of generous omnipresent ordered delivery is becoming more obviously and urgently viable again. Well ordered, for everyone, delivered to time, to where there is most need, and generous, not skimping. Achieving this will mean more investment, but it will also mean more ideas and above all more cooperation. For too long a party with a reputation for competence has been trusted with our social fabric and services. Those politicians who, as teenagers, joined the Conservative party in the late 1970s and 1980s did so because they admired Mrs Thatcher's policy of wrecking – so-called 'creative destruction'. They are and were very competent, but only at breaking things – we must ensure they are never trusted again. ■

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