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Scotland is showing us the route to a fairer society

I am not pessimistic when it comes to global trends. But closer to home the statistics are a lot less rosy. People are feeling shattered. Hopes are being shattered. Much of the fabric of society feels shattered.

By Danny Dorling

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Whether it's our children's education, the availability of good quality and affordable housing, the ability of the NHS to care for us or of the economy to thrive – all shattered. Many of those previously just coping, can no longer cope.

This might feel as true for you in Scotland as it does for me, living in England. But there are positive changes in Scotland which show us a better way forward.

Last month the Financial Fairness Trust reported that nearly two million British households were missing three or more meals a month, due to cost. Food banks are proliferating but it is the Scottish Government that is proposing a plan to begin to make food banks unnecessary.

In our shattered nation, children in families of three children or more, are especially likely to go hungry. This is the direct result of policies penalising larger families. In Scotland that trend is being reversed by the Scottish Child Payment, ensuring that all families on Universal Credit, and other qualifying benefits, receive an extra £25 a week for every child up to age sixteen.

Unfortunately, Labour Party leader Keir Starmer has pledged to keep the two-child benefit limit in England, shattering what could have been a consensus for the healthier, fairer future of the UK.

Levels of debt have increased for millions of people, while a very few have seen their riches soar. Inequality has grown to levels higher than can be found almost anywhere else in Europe. By 2021 only Bulgaria was more unequal than the UK by income.

In England the policy of the two main political parties is to stagger forward, keeping a stiff upper lip. Politicians in England promise only minor remedial actions with short-term impact. Those in Northern Ireland ask for more and have the lowest child poverty rate in the UK very similar to Scotland's.

In Wales anger at England's apathy grows. People ask why are the basics no longer within reach? A home for everyone. Teachers who are not exhausted. Care for those who need it. The choice to do work that is useful. And food for everyone who is hungry. Food they can buy with money they have – not that they beg for.

People there are increasingly willing to ask who is taking too big a share of what we need? Of homes, of spending on education, of our time to care for others or in profits from basic services. Why is there not enough left for those who are hungry or homeless? And people are asking why we tolerate this more than any other people in Europe today?

The alternatives to the shattering already exist. They are being attempted in Scotland – today. They are being argued for in Wales – now. They have been in place in many countries in much of the rest of Europe for decades.

We once worked together to eradicate soup kitchens and to create a more equal, dynamic economy, even in England. We can do it again.

Danny Dorling is the Halford Mackinder Professor at the University of Oxford. He will be previewing his latest book 'Shattered Nation' at an event in Edinburgh hosted by the David Hume Institute and Scotland's Future Forum on 23rd August. Shattered Nation is published by Verso, on September 19 2023.