

# GRENOBLE ECOLE DE MANAGEMENT

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### EPREUVE ORALE D'ANGLAIS

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#### **The Tories' plan for poor people**

By Polly Toynbee

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There can rarely have been a better fit for Ebenezer Scrooge<sup>1</sup> than Iain Duncan Smith, our Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. He told Andrew Neil on the BBC's Sunday Politics that he wants child benefit limited to a family's first two children. It would save money and prompt "behavioural change".

For a country already failing to replace its population, with just 1.9 babies per woman, dissuading child-bearing is a mistaken and nasty ambition. When Scrooge asks, "Are there no workhouses?" he is told that many would rather die than go into one. "If they would rather die," Scrooge replies, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

Duncan Smith himself has four children. Many other Tory politicians have more than two children. So this government is far more fecund than the general population. But people like them are not the target of this "behavioural change". What the government wants is fewer oiks.<sup>2</sup>

Back in 1974 Keith Joseph destroyed his Tory leadership hopes with this speech: "A high and rising proportion of children are being born to mothers least fitted to bring children into the world ... Some are of low intelligence, most of low educational attainment. They are unlikely to be able to give children the stable emotional background, the consistent combination of love and firmness ... They are producing problem children ... The balance of our human stock, is threatened."

Sir Keith had four children but apparently they didn't threaten "our human stock". These days, what he said might be less controversial: it's an everyday rightwing press platitude.

Some themes deep in the heart of Toryism just never go away. Up they pop, over and over. Control the lower orders, stop them breeding, check their spending, castigate their lifestyles. Poking, sneering, moralising and despising are hardwired within Tory DNA.

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<sup>1</sup> He is the main character of Charles Dickens' novella, *A Christmas Carol*.

<sup>2</sup> Oik: a person regarded as inferior because ignorant, ill-educated, or lower-class

The desire to extirpate the poor goes back a long way. In 1913 the eye-opening report, *Round About a Pound a Week* by Maud Pember Reeves and her group of Fabian women (republished by Persephone Books) detailed the household accounts of mothers trying to keep their families on the average £1 manual wage. The report's irrefutable evidence showed that wages were too low to live on, puncturing the perpetual myth among the comfortable (then as now) that the working classes were "bad managers". In fact, these mothers scrimped every farthing, maximising calories in bread and dripping.

I was reminded of that book because Pember Reeves wrote angrily of middle-class assertions that no one should have children until they can afford them. She pointed out that working families would never have any if they waited for that day – but, of course, that is what Duncan Smith wants.

Pember Reeves was even more scathing about the well-off who preach what she calls contemptuously "the gospel of porridge". Ah, porridge! Right on cue, up popped Lady Jenkin, wife of Tory MP Bernard Jenkin, last week: "Poor people don't know how to cook. I had a large bowl of porridge today, which cost 4p." She was presenting the Church of England report which found that 4 million people are going hungry.

*The Mail* hurried to her home and she told them how to cook a three-course meal for 57p – soup, rice and lentils, and banana and custard powder. The Mail's verdict? "Simple, filling and very tasty." So here we are, back with the argument that never changes: poverty is caused by fecklessness and dependency, not by sub-survivable rates of pay.

Easier for people such as Lady Jenkin to ignore the steep fall in real wages, or that only one in 40 new jobs since the crash has been full time. Easier to overlook Monday's report from the Office for National Statistics showing the bottom 10% have suffered much higher rates of inflation than the well-off, spending more on food and fuel. The Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that on present cuts alone, a third of children will have fallen into poverty by 2020.