

Chapter 1

The Abdication of Middle Britain

*I say there are simple answers to many of our problems – simple, but hard.
It's the complicated answer that's easy because it avoids facing the hard
moral issues.*

Ronald Reagan¹

The promotion of the common good is a duty incumbent upon all citizens. The Americans enshrined it in the Preamble to their Constitution as the need to 'promote the general welfare'. It is a responsibility once seized upon by the middle class as its *raison d'être*. Whilst, broadly speaking, the urge to encourage and assist others through charity and good deeds still remains a characteristic of our middle class, the willingness to chastise and upbraid those who offend against common values, and thus against the common good, does not. Condemnation of wrong is the 'hard part' of the promotion of the common good – the stick, without whose use the carrot is just appeasement.

I shall suggest throughout this work that the decline in middle class willingness to display disapproval and cast judgment on others is mirrored in a decline in civility in British society, as there is no longer a prescriptive norm that shapes our modes of behaviour. Just as there are disagreements as to what exactly constitutes the middle class, there are many different opinions as to what its social function is (or whether it has one at all). In the course of this book, I will outline many responsibilities I believe our middle class currently neglects in failing to promote the common good. But if there were only to be one, it would be this: to be civil. To be civil, and through

[1] As quoted in *The Economist* 'Special Report: the Reagan legacy' 12th June 2004.

word and deed and example to encourage civility in others. In this, our middle class currently fails.

Aristotle said that the best state is one dominated by the middle class.² This is true — not only in that the middle class should have control of the state's means of governance, but also in that their *values* ought to dominate the political environment. Since the inception of true representative democracy, this has been the case in Great Britain. That it is untrue now is not the result of an essential change in society's make-up, as such. We still have a middle class — it just doesn't act like one. It accepts all the benefits of its position, but discharges none of the traditionally concomitant responsibilities — the responsibility to encourage, to exert influence, to condemn — to *lead* the society it exists in, to do more than merely occupy space and spend money. In its modern reluctance to perform these rites, it simply reflects the people that make it up: its approach is the me-focus of the individual writ large. And a large segment of the middle class happily adopts the agenda and values of (and votes for) a strange new liberal London set, which openly loathes the middle class that spawned it.

Hutber wrote 30 years ago. His work charted the decline of the middle class and called on it to defend itself, and reinstate itself as the foundation of British society — of its stability and its strength. My contention is that, largely voluntarily, our middle class has abstained from doing so, and that the enormously damaging collapse of our society's norms and standards is largely a result of that abdication of responsibility. Hutber sought to rouse his class to the fight whilst it still could. My outlook, thirty years on, after so much of that fight has been lost, is much more pessimistic.

The Role of Middle Britain

What is the purpose of this book?

To ask this is to ask, what do individuals want to accomplish when they howl, 'something is wrong!'

I think that there will be many books like this. Many in Britain could write one, if they added together the observations of the wrongs they observe from day to day and tried to explain them. We are trying to explain to one another why we are unhappy.

My answer is that the middle class is not doing its job. I believe that the middle class should wield a controlling influence on soci-

[2] Aristotle *Politics* trans Benjamin Jowett (Kitchener, 1999) p. 95:
<http://www.economics.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/aristotle/Politics.pdf>

ety's morality and conscience, in a broadly conservative and judgmental way. At the least, it is not pulling its weight. At the worst, it is at the forefront of dismantling our traditional mores and values at the very time in which Britain most needs 'the instinctive sanity of the middle class'.³

I seek to begin a discussion. By throwing up my hands and saying, don't do this — think differently, I seek to have people talk more about the problems I see, and imagine they do too. For ironically, whilst the behaviour of the middle class sets society's tone, determines its atmosphere, increasingly our political outlook is so dictated by a narrow, politically intolerant group of supposed 'liberals' (though they are the most illiberal people to hold sway in Britain since Cromwell) that many are afraid to be condemned for the 'incorrectness' of their views, and keep their politics to themselves. In an environment supposedly more interconnected than ever, we increasingly live in pockets, and don't discuss these things that upset us most about the world around us: we think we are alone in noting these faults and flaws that damn our society. We sit silent, outlining to no one, other than perhaps our family members, the way that 'everybody's changing and I don't feel right'⁴ — the way that we can feel our country slipping away from what we believe in.

I seek to start conversations around tables, to encourage a sense of commonality: commonality in being troubled by the state of Britain in the first place, and then a commonality in caring enough to be willing to play one's small part in doing something about it. If that sense of commonality is to exist once again, individuals should be more willing to intervene, to say to the ten year old idly tearing off the seat cover on the bus, 'stop that' — for they will not feel morally adrift in a world that does not seem to reflect their values, but instead be sure that others — not just in a philosophical sense, but in an actual, others-on-the-bus sense — share their unwillingness to see their community fall apart, and will speak up in support of them.

Thus in his recent book *Status Anxiety*,⁵ Alain de Botton pursued entirely the wrong line: people should worry *more* about what others think about them, not *less*: we should give more thought to the opprobrium and judgment of our peers. Status anxiety — concern about the esteem in which we are held by our fellow man, by fellow

[3] John Galsworthy *The Man of Property* first pub 1906, Heinemann 1946 p. 53.

[4] Keane 'Everybody's Changing' from the album *Hopes and Fears* (2004, Interscope Records).

[5] Alain de Botton *Status Anxiety* (London, 2004).

citizens — holds society together. If the concern is strong enough, individuals tailor their behaviour to avoid opprobrium, facilitating a community in which the state needs less power to ensure order as the care individuals have about the opinions of others causes them to behave in a more orderly way.

So: we should be *more* willing to reject the behaviour of others, based on standards we hold to be objective, rather than attempting to ‘empathise’ with them and view their position subjectively. ‘Society needs to condemn a little more and understand a little less.’⁶ We shouldn’t allow our judgments to be distorted by over-empathising — by always trying to see the other point of view — because sometimes there *is* a right answer, and it involves telling someone that they are wrong. Such condemnation must come from conviction that refuses to tailor itself to the whim of fashion or distort itself to allow every perspective to hold sway.

In other words, we should be more prejudiced.

Instead, just at the time when society needs most guidance, we have educated our children to be ‘politically correct’, positively promulgating the idea that it is wrong to condemn the behaviour of others. We should be doing quite the opposite of this: we should be instilling moral rigidity. People are called ‘uptight’ or ‘old-fashioned’ if they attempt to support standards of behaviour that are in society’s interests; they are undermined by the very people such standards benefit. This is destructive and wrong. Moral rigidity is a social virtue and should be taught to society’s citizens.

The middle class is guilty not merely of the abandonment of these core principles, but also of complicity in their impending utter destruction: for change this total and this swift could not have been accomplished without the middle class actively promulgating it, mocking and sneering at the things it once held dear.

Why is it that the middle class behaves like this? Perhaps, as Theodore Dalrymple suggests, in reaction to the loss of empire and subsequent loss of prestige and sense of purpose, they have ‘turned with the ferocity of disappointment on a culture that had first raised its hopes and expectations and then dashed them’.⁷ Internally, too, the position of municipal power held by the upper middle class in Joseph Chamberlain’s day — the ability to control the events and style of the city in which they lived — has in the main died away too. Outside interests control the instruments of commerce and industry

[6] John Major, in interview with the *Mail on Sunday* 21st February 1993.

[7] Theodore Dalrymple ‘The Britain that Died with Her’ *The Spectator* 6th April 2002.

that were once held by the town's bourgeoisie. The bank is no longer run by Mr Smith whom everyone knows, but by an imported ladder-climber from the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation, who'll have disappeared in two years time, and knows it. Without the control of the pillars of its society, and the sense of permanence that that gives, the middle class is denied its main tool in the role it has accrued and held since our emergence from the feudal system — 'tempering the arrogance of the aristocracy, restraining the crudity of the masses'.⁸ Perhaps it instinctively feels that loss, and acts in the absence of that role like the sheriff unjustly deprived of his badge, degenerating until he's just another washed-up bum at the bar who used to be somebody.

On the other hand, perhaps the decline of any real mass religious conviction is the crucial factor. Much has been written about the decline of faith in British society (and elsewhere). It seems to me that whilst the two are not necessarily connected, it is undeniably true that during the time in which we have lost faith, we have also lost faithfulness — faithfulness to ideals and aspirations and modes of proper behaviour, to restraint, fiscal prudence, and moral strength, the maintenance of all of which is in the interests of all, even in an entirely secular society. For 'faith, obedience and mercy are social virtues'⁹ and they are most often found in one another's company.

It is certainly true that some of the most positive influence the middle class has had on the working class was consciously motivated by faith. Men and women like John Wesley 'exhorted the working class to live upright, respectable, god-fearing lives';¹⁰ volunteer welfare reformers motivated by faith and by the Christian ethic did so much to improve the conditions of their fellow men in communities across the country. There is no longer any organisation of middle class people that sees as its function the betterment and improvement of the lot of the working poor, of the type so common for hundreds of years in our past.

So the lack of a faith held in common might be one cause. But so might be a kind of communal self-loathing the middle class visits upon itself now, in which many of its members prefer to self-consciously stand outside it and ridicule it than acknowledge that they are part of it, whilst many of those that remain are cowed into

[8] Jan Morris *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* London, 2001 p. 49.

[9] Alastair Hannay 'Introduction' in Soren Kirkegaard *Fear and Trembling*, translated Alastair Hannay (London, 1985) p. 7. It should be noted that Hannay was positing the position of a figurative other person in that passage, rather than necessarily expressing his own position.

[10] Roy Hattersley *Songs of Praise* BBC2 18th July 2004.

silence by the absence of group certainty in the rectitude of proper modes of behaviour, and by the relentless mockery of it — a silence in which the few objecting voices still raised are made to sound shrill.

Whatever the cause, there is no doubt that the middle class has pushed aside its customary decorum and restraint. Chapters of this book document the decline of civility and behaviour in British society about which the middle class have not merely abstained from judgment (in itself, a great fault); rather, much of it has participated in it. The night's quota of leering, binge-drinking louts — a dominant force in British town life, broadly speaking unique to this country — is just as likely to contain those who hold down archetypically middle class jobs in computer programming or accountancy as those that have finished a day of manual labour.

Obviously it would be wrong to lay the responsibility for this change solely at the door of the middle class. The lack of moral rigidity is manifested across the social spectrum, and is not confined to any group within it. However, an influential element of that political correctness currently instilled in 'liberal' middle class thinking and in schools is the idea that the behaviour of others cannot be criticized if it is apparently a reflection of their 'culture'. For the argument in favour of moral rigidity to have force, the belief that others may, within their own 'cultural framework', decide rights and wrongs through an 'indigenous moral spectrum' (what the Parekh report termed 'moral pluralism'¹¹) must be defeated.

Moral pluralism or 'relativism' is normally posited in international terms — in the differences in laws exercised by or norms exhibited in different countries. The logic of moral relativism is that, since there is no culture-neutral standard for determining universal moral values, moral values are entirely relative to cultures, and therefore nations or groups should develop along their own cultural lines without external criticism or concern.

But in any given society we impose laws on 'our' culture as if 'we' are an intellectually and morally homogenous whole, which of course we are not — but once those laws are passed, citizens have to accept what is held to be 'right'. Why is that construct discarded at a nation's border — surely 'right' isn't stopped by a mountain range, a river, or a line in the sand, laid down by an accident of history? How ludicrous does any system of morality become if it's held to be

[11] 'The Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain' part 1: <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects/meb/reportPartOne.html>

inanimate outside a sphere of individuals that, broadly speaking, practice its strictures anyway?

Through the concept of 'jurisdiction' the *law* has found ways to slickly justify such a situation, but how is it possible either *logically* or *morally*? Moral relativism is simply cowardice, an unwillingness to face the implications of the fact that other societies do things that are wrong. If we would hold such things to be 'wrong' within our own culture, we should hold them to be wrong *per se*, if we are to be intellectually honest.

Accepting a kind of moral relativism, in which something held to be abhorrent in 'our' culture is perfectly permissible in 'theirs', undermines the whole concept of law *anywhere*. Humanity can't be divided up into convenient groups in which rights are absolute and vital in some, and utterly disposable in others. How can I impose any laws on you (through every 'legitimate' channel in society, be it court, parliament etcetera) in 'our' country, if you might simply say 'I agree with *them*' over there — I don't feel represented by *this* right and wrong, but by *that*: you tell me that the two are equal and *they're* entitled to this practice — why aren't I?'

One can only arrive at the conclusion that — rather than scattered pockets of rights and wrongs, sprung up through the happenstance of history — there are *absolute rights and wrongs* and that it is our duty, flawed and imperfect as we are, to seek and attempt to practice them, and to promulgate them. Thus, it is wrong that in the West we believe that we have, broadly speaking, determined these absolutes, but through one device or another continue to justify the state of suffering much of the rest of the world's citizenry endure, outside the sphere in which those absolutes are recognised.

Whilst the question of international morality can be no more than touched on given the scope of this book, moral relativism is obviously a destructive philosophy on an intra-national scale. Where in an international sense moral relativism damages the logic of law, domestically it is corrosive. Attempts to 'empower' groups within society by recognizing a right on their part to live in ways forbidden to others is an absurdity. To say this would be trite, if so many did not seem to preach against it: in order for law to work, citizens with different beliefs or individuals arriving in a nation from another culture must accept its laws. More fundamentally, they must accept its mores. They must tailor their behaviour to conform to the way of life of those already there, in return for being accepted into society.

Moral rigidity, more conformity and more prejudice are needed across the board: its lack is manifested as much in the peoples

whose ancestry can be traced back in these islands for some time as it is in more recent immigrants. My argument may be attacked on many grounds, but 'racism' should not be one of them. Indeed, it is often recent arrivals to the United Kingdom, coming in part because they have a misplaced faith in the decent state of British society, who are most appalled.

I may be accused of encouraging conformity at the cost of individual liberty. But always in society there is the need for a balance between individual creativity and freedom, and conformity to common ideals. There obviously have to be *some* values important enough to be enforced; otherwise we would live in a state without laws. The question is one of how far individual liberty should be infringed at the benefit of conformity. Furthermore, in Britain it is not individual liberty that has been stretched so much as the extent to which individuals are permitted to act to the detriment of social norms without repercussion.

These social norms must be reinstated by the people that live here, acting as individuals in their own interest and in the interest of the community they live in. To achieve this end, we must first admit — *proclaim* — that we *aspire* to something, for our nation to *be* something, to be *different*. For we are witnessing a societal crisis of confidence. Britain's is a culture that has given up on its aspirations, and her citizens can sense it. Our country no longer aspires to excellence: excellence in policing, in teaching, in caring for the sick, in our armed forces. Once this happens, even mediocrity is only achieved occasionally. We must agree that we wish to be better than we are.

Aspiration and Respectability

'Respectability' is a much-derided quality. Propriety, keeping up appearances, moral opprobrium — these are concepts apparently seen by many as the detritus of a past age. But when respectability is valued, when its worth is such that individuals aspire to it, then these notions guide society. The decline of these values has seen our society decline too.

A great difference between Hutber's frame of reference and mine is the effect of the Thatcher government that occurred between our times of writing. The tremendous rejuvenating effect of Thatcherism contributed enormously to national self-esteem and economic wellbeing. But it did nothing to halt the decline of the power of social opprobrium. More than ever before, in the Thatcher years social mobility was possible (and encouraged) — but those

moving failed to adopt the attitudes, mores and lifestyles normally concomitant with their new status.

The huge post-war expansion of state-employed individuals saw people doing jobs, and living lives, which would normally be categorised as middle class. But a large number of such people declined to define *themselves* as middle class, even resenting the label if applied to them. The political atmosphere of the 1980s exacerbated this.

For the first time, the greatest strength of our establishment — its ability to absorb newcomers and convert them to its attitudes — failed. Thatcher-era upwardly mobiles adhered to the outlooks and lifestyles of their old social groups. State-employed middle-income professionals occupied and still occupy their own latently anti-establishment sub-culture. The organic change seen in most individuals moving upwards in society to conform to cultural norms and adopt conventional establishment attitudes, once so natural when ‘making something of yourself’ was a universal aim and respectability a desirable quality, no longer occurs.

This change is very important. It marks more than a change in outlook; for the outlook of our middle class defines how society feels about itself, and shapes the nature of our country. The retention of lower-class resentment, coupled with a growing cynicism with regard to authority of all kinds, has led to the near-dominance of an anti-establishment sentiment on the part of the middle class that permeates British culture and colours the way the country feels about itself.

This constitutes the end of the community, at least in any traditionally recognisable sense. For when the middle class has given up its faith in society, it sounds a death knell for the way we have lived for so long. The middle has stopped believing in the institutions that protect and define society — the police force, the courts, Parliament, the armed forces. In the United States, a situation akin to this was reached by way of a cataclysmic event — the Vietnam War. And yet their ‘faith’ — in their Presidency, in their Congress, in their state, in their country — is at heart still stronger than that of the middle in this country. Our great disillusionment came in incremental steps, in slips and little slides so small we hardly noticed, in the half-century since the Second World War.

Society depends on the middle to keep faith with it. Even when we privately acknowledge our doubt — for instance, our fears that the police are not the shining flawless monument to beneficent protection our forefathers painted them as being — the role of the

middle is to still *profess* so to do. For it is in that assumption — that assumed faith — that society is able to continue to be governed, to be policed and so forth. This has been turned on its head: the standard attitude now is to profess instinctive *distrust* of such institutions. The ‘middle’ cliché our grandparents shared in believing the police were universally hearty, kind men has given way to today’s cliché of believing them to be foul and uniformly corrupt.

When the middle class teaches its children that ‘the policeman is your friend’, society can be policed: taking our lead from the middle, we as a society believe that, broadly speaking, the police act fairly and in the best interests of us all. When the middle accepts the hypercritical view now so common, the institution is fatally undermined, becoming a sad parody of its former self. Denied the support of those who for so long gave it meaning, stumbling uncertainly, struck by those thought to be its friends, the force sinks into the mire and no longer does its job.¹² For a police force is not — should not be — something *imposed on* society; it is something that should grow out of society. It depends on the middle for *moral support*.

This withdrawal is reflected across many of society’s manifestations — in our schools, our hospitals, our democratic structures. All of them depend on the middle and all are suffering as a result of its retreat.

Moral support has been withdrawn as the middle class has declined to partake any longer in traditional modes of behaviour. Society’s cohesion depends on certain rites — from respect being paid to institutions and the holders of office, and the performance of pleasantries, to the ritual acknowledgment of the holding in common of certain core beliefs. All of such things lack certainty now, because the middle class has changed.

This change is most obviously displayed in the way we address, treat and react to one another, in Britain today. The change is to do with more than simply a decline in politeness, though that is certainly true. It is concerned with the nature of the individual’s discourse with the world and one another; it concerns the attitude to authority, particularly to the middle aged that, year after year, does the heavy lifting of society’s work. In cultures such as Japan’s, the junior reverses the senior as one that has earned respect through

[12] Peculiarly, this change has not been reflected in our common myths, reflected in the modern age in the newest version of our eternal storytelling tradition, television: for the police in our books and on our TV screens continue to be heroes, whilst in our newspapers, they are villains. This is particularly ironic as interest in detective fiction is a great middle-class occupation.

experience. Such was once the case here. Instead, just as the middle, that should lead, apes the behaviour of the working class, so the middle-aged, who should lead, increasingly join in the cult of youth: British culture revolves more and more around the whimsy of teen performers and 'celebrities', rewarded with our attention not for achievements, but simply for *being*.

This phenomenon is exemplified by the successful TV show *Big Brother*, in which young, relatively attractive, very stupid people live before constantly recording cameras for 10 weeks. We are told that we should be interested in them, in their infantile thoughts and infantile behaviour: and, because those around us are, increasingly we *are* interested in them. Their pseudo-philosophical discussions and midnight gropes are totally tedious in themselves, but because they form a basis for common discussion, they (and other, similarly tedious things) become important when one is seeking a tool to be able to interact with a large segment of society that disowns all but the most trivial of cultural pursuits.

Traditionally, the real cultural pursuits – theatre, art, literature, cinema with any significance – formed such common interest: and they provided not only entertainment, but also moral instruction. Whilst propriety, decency and decorum might be transgressed, they would not be methodically ridiculed and broken down, as now. We have failed to instil an interest in any of these pursuits in most of the population. But individuals still seek moral lessons from the world around them: and now, rather than any example of decency being set, we have only the *Big Brothers* of this world to look to. Reality TV doesn't just reflect reality; it often shapes it. When individuals see others on television swear profusely, smash things, speed away from the police, they often become more likely to do those things themselves. Thus, the example traditionally provided by a functioning middle-aged middle class – of the rewards gained by hard work, of the success to be had in so working whilst conforming to accepted modes of behaviour – is all but absent as the middle fawns on those less productive and less socially beneficial than itself. There seems to young middle-class people to be little incentive in following the abstemious path their industrious parents underwent, when, after all, everyone's more interested in the mores of those who put two fingers up to rules and work anyway.

Many keen to downplay the extent of Britain's social decline make the traditional objection to theses such as mine: they suggest that I point to a halcyon age that never truly existed, and that observations such as mine are not new. This trite old line, constantly

spouted by those seeking to undermine negative observations of society's problems has little credibility. Take the example given above, of the destruction wrought by a child on a bus in front of adults. The evidence I see tells me that individuals in society would once have been much more likely to have acted to halt such behaviour than they are now. Just as policemen and teachers were once able to physically discipline errant children and now cannot, the ethos of wider society was once more conducive to intervention in the misbehaviour of the young but now is not, not only because of the removal of the tool of physical chastisement but also of a culture of fear — we fear the repercussions of acting in the litigious age, but also we fear violence from those that once would have been held in check by a culture of respect. The same is true — especially the fear of violent response — in relation to the thuggery and vandalism of adults.

Even if that is in fact not the case, and that this state is nothing new, my concern is how society *should* be. What of it, if others had bemoaned their culture, as I now bemoan mine? Does it mean that observations of the current ills of society are invalid, if similar complaints were made in the age of the mods and the rockers? Indeed, might the problems that others have observed in *that* age, help explain how we have come to our problems in *this* age?

Walpole made much of the apparently dissolute state of his fellow Britons by way of pointing out that 'not half as many coaches attended Chatham's¹³ funeral as had attended the actor-manager Garrick's'.¹⁴ Here, we should suppose, is evidence that our cult of the individual, and societally peripheral individual at that, is nothing new.

Indeed, the comparison runs deep, as Walpole also bemoaned 'the general breakdown in law and order, the huge increase in the number of highwaymen and footpads infesting the roads, and the growing permissiveness of a society mad for scandal'.¹⁵ So yes, indeed we have faced such a plight before: but that is not to say that we are guaranteed to overcome it. Rather, the question is, do we have the *strength* to, as we did then? And does not this fascination with the frivolous run *deeper* than it did then? For whilst it is true that this has long been a cultural strand in our national life, that strand in Walpole's time did not on the whole permeate the

[13] The former prime minister William Pitt the Elder.

[14] As quoted in Edward Grierson *The Imperial Dream: British Commonwealth and Empire 1775-1969* London, 1972 p. 33.

[15] *Ibid.*

thoughtful classes, and most individuals within them had an idea of proportion: it is the *extent* of the modern fascination with the peripheral and concomitant abstention from the realities of life that are so shocking. Walpole's middle-class contemporaries were acutely aware of their place in that world, had opinions on the rightness and rectitude of modes of social behaviour, believed in their ability to shape the world around them through exercising moral judgment. On the other hand, we have given up on trying to shape reality, to give it any sense of moral purpose, and instead content ourselves with recording and watching it: vis *Big Brother*, people sit around doing very little, watching TV footage of people sitting around doing very little.

In our rudderless society, those willing to fill the vacuum left by the absence of a strong middle have instilled the notion that rudeness is a legitimate manner of expression; the ruder one is, the stronger, the more aggressive, and the more successful. This is a step back from all the lessons civilization has gained. Aspiration — the wish to better oneself — is inverted, and individuals 'aspire' to behave badly.

Perhaps even on a conscious level, great swathes of the element in society that has traditionally governed its path have decided that they don't *want* to be middle class. The mimicking of inner city culture, the slurring of accents to form a Creole of sub-lingual 'tribal' discourse in which one recognises another 'alright' person by their similar rejection of proper English, is symbolic of a deliberate effort by some whose parents and upbringing are thoroughly middle class to reject the world of their forebears — and by others, merely an attempt to conform to youth culture around them. In young Britain, mimicry of, specifically, black American ghetto culture has been followed by mimicry of those that adopt that mimicry.

This alienation of the middle class from itself is not new. Hutber wrote in 1976:

I spent the first twenty-five years of my life in Ealing ... surely, even today, a quintessentially middle-class place ... I derive a warmth and comfort from that background. How strange that I should have thought it necessary to write the preceding sentence. Nobody would regard it as being in the least unusual or out of the way for someone with a working-class background to pay tribute to what it had given him. That it is, alas, more unusual to praise a suburban home rather than, say, a back street in Leeds is an indication of how thoroughly we have all been brainwashed.¹⁶

[16] Hutber p. 10.

The association of decent standards of behaviour with a reviled class and tradition is tremendously damaging. I am greatly concerned by the rise in crime in Britain, and address it later: but in determining the everyday nature of society, as Edmund Burke wrote, 'manners are of more importance than laws'.¹⁷ The greatest decline in societal wellbeing has occurred in the events, behaviour and discourse that occupy the gap between actual lawbreaking and behaviour that is absolutely without flaw. The way we treat one another would shock many of our forebears from the ostensibly 'less civilised' past. The abandonment of notions of politeness are unique to Britain's middle: 'the middle class of rural Umbria or young clubbers in Madrid observe a social etiquette that is far closer to that of Edwardian London than anything that you will [now] find in this country. Manners are not so readily tainted with snobbery as they are here.'¹⁸

We have surrendered our provincial town and city centres to an aggressive youth, mob culture; after a certain time, it is neither pleasant nor safe for most people to be in the centre of the town they live in. We are threatened by groups of drunken young men, or accosted by gangs of hooded teenagers, for daring to venture out into our own towns. Resilient, enduring people that we are, it is normally adapted to and not mentioned: if it is pointed out, most commonly by a shocked visitor from abroad, the answer is normally that 'well, that's how it is'. But it is *not* how it is elsewhere, nor should it be here.

Zero Tolerance

Taking action against crime at its most innocuous sends a clear message that illegal behaviour will not be tolerated, reducing the incidence of every level of crime.¹⁹

If as a culture we allow individuals to swear, to shout, to push and shove, the next level of authority is challenged. There is always an instinct to rebel and desire to transgress (such an instinct is often a symptom of an individuality and non-conformism that is desirable). But raise the bar on what is socially acceptable, and that instinct is aimed at a more significant target. Fail to instil discipline

[17] Burke, Edmund *Selected Works of Edmund Burke* ed. E J Payne, Francis Canavan 1999:

<http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Burke/brkSWv3cl.html>

[18] Bella Thomas 'Previous Convictions' *Prospect* February 2003 p. 80.

[19] George L Kelling and Ronald Corbett 'This Works: Preventing and Reducing Crime' *Civic Bulletin*, No 32 March 2003: Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute p. 2.

in small things in our children's lives, and they will push and push until a barrier willing to resist them is reached. When this process goes on long enough, society has a large group of people (predominantly, but not all, male) who seem entirely unable and unwilling to exert any control over their own behaviour, and are unceasingly aggressive towards others — including to the weak, the elderly. Such is now the case in Britain.

Society's atmosphere is governed by such attitudes. The air of strong authority makes people less likely to abuse their fellows — likewise, its absence makes such abuse more likely. This authority doesn't have to be one upheld by policing and laws; indeed, attempts to enforce such rules are often counterproductive. Rather, moral opprobrium and peer condemnation are the most effective tools in enforcing cultural behaviour patterns. The refusal of the new middle class to wield these tools has undermined all our traditions and standards. Remove the idea of our fellows' watchfulness and condemnation of transgression, an overarching cultural theme that has been with us since the earliest days of the tribe, and society ceases to be a place in which rules are in force but are exceptionally avoided — a society that is essentially law-abiding — and becomes a place in which laws are abstract and feel as if they are nothing to do with us, and are only arbitrarily applied to those unfortunate enough to come to the attention of a machine far away from us — a society that is essentially lawless.

By way of example: according to the shop workers' union, every minute of every working day in this country a member of shop staff is attacked by a customer.²⁰ Most frequently, workers are attacked after work, by customers they've refused to serve — by gangs of youths refused alcohol, or cigarettes. In 2002, 16,000 workers were physically assaulted during the course of their work. On average, workers can expect to be verbally abused every three days, threatened every 15 days, and actually attacked once a month.²¹ It is lamentable that in modern Britain, people cannot work in sales departments of normal stores free from fear. Whilst obviously wrong, it has always been understood that there is an element of risk in working as a teller in a bank, or as the clerk of a late night store: criminals have traditionally targeted such places. But this more recent phenomenon is not driven by actual criminal intent per

[20] 'Every minute of every day, a shopworker is attacked by a member of the public' Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers 29th September 2003: http://www.usdaw.org.uk/usdaw/news/1064852850_2368.html

[21] *Ibid.*

se (that is, for the individual to profit from obtaining stolen goods etcetera), but rather by the uncontrolled aggression prevalent in our tantrum society, where individuals are effectively taught that they will never be told 'no'.

The great overarching crisis in British society is the falling away of authority — be it in our schools with teachers unable to maintain discipline, in our hospitals where even basic standards seem impossible to enforce, or on our streets where our police are unable to stop so much aggression and yobbishness, and much worse. The ability to maintain standards in these places rests on the willingness of society to ascribe to them, and give the support necessary to those appointed to uphold them — a willingness that depends on the middle class. Both these things, the desire for standards and the willingness to enforce rules, are in doubt. Our teachers are undermined by rules that protect the 'rights' of students at the cost of any discipline, and by the automatic support of every claim against them until, after being exposed without defence to many months of soul-destroying assumption of guilt and the battering by the community that goes with it, such claims can be proven wrong. The conscious destruction of the traditional hierarchy in our hospitals has been paralleled by the fall of any real standard of hygiene in the NHS, source of much 'secondary sickness' — conditions (often fatal) caught *after* entering the hospital — as there is no-one to enforce the drudgery of cleanliness necessary to prevent it. The abdication of the middle class from its traditional position as moral supporter of those society delegates to lead has led to the fall of authority in all these arenas.

But that authority once existed in all these places. It can be regained. The petty crime, the litter, the graffiti, the aggression on our streets (and in our lives) and the despondence about our national future, are *not* inevitable. These things are natural products of our national decline, prompted by the failure of our middle class to defend the values and beliefs that hold littering to be wrong, aggression to be wrong, is essentially patriotic and proud of country, and so forth. We must consciously subscribe to standards and support those striving to uphold them. Decline is not irresistible.

We must teach people to be prejudiced once again. The place to start is education.