



Modern Day Clearances

Rigged capitalism has always required disposable populations in order to function. 'Cleansing' is akin to the Scottish land clearances Mark Braund outlines how to address the root causes.

The government's controversial cap on housing benefit comes into effect this April. When first announced, Boris Johnson vowed to fight a policy he described as 'Kosovo-style social cleansing'. The Mayor of London would have done better to compare it to the Scottish Highland Clearances, for here the parallels are more evident, both in terms of their motivation and the likely consequences.

The clearances, like the land enclosures that began much earlier in England, were, according to their supporters, motivated by the need to improve agricultural efficiency to feed a growing population. For others they were a means by which a privileged elite, discomfited by rapid social change and threats to their position, were able to re-assert their power over the masses. Today it's much the same: the government argues for housing benefit cuts as an essential part of its deficit reduction plan,

an objective shaped by a particular interpretation of economics. For those who reject that interpretation, they are part of a pernicious project to defend elite wealth in an increasingly uncertain world. Westminster councillor Philippa Rowe describes as 'absolutely ludicrous' a situation where anyone entitled to housing benefit can claim up to £2,000 a week to live in a desirable part of central London. But she ignores the fact that it is a dysfunctional market in private rented housing that has driven up social rents, along with the failure to build sufficient new homes.

It is absurd that the state, through the redistribution of revenues raised through unfair taxation on incomes and

enterprise, has to subsidise the housing costs of millions of people to the tune of £21 billion a year. But more absurd is the fact many housing benefit recipients are in work but not earning enough to cover those costs. People like the caretaker in Brent who earns £12,000 a year but will lose £80 a week in benefits. He will also lose his job because he won't be able to get to his workplace by 7am, assuming he's able to find an affordable home in a cheaper area.

Who will do thousands of essential jobs that involve unsociable hours and require people to live near their workplaces if, as is estimated, 9,000 London households will be forced to move as a result of the cap?

And where are these displaced people to go? Hastings, for some bizarre reason, is top of many pundits' list. But the seaside

town is already one of the poorest in the south of England, with 40% of the workforce employed in the public sector providing services to those denied the economic opportunities to support themselves.

The government hopes the cap will force private sector landlords to lower their rents, but this seems unlikely. In the month after the policy was announced, Lambeth Council had to place ten newly homeless families in bed and breakfast

likely consequences of the housing benefit cap are morally equivalent to the highland clearances.

With government statistics showing a 14% rise in homelessness even before the cuts kick in, there is an urgent need for a long-term solution to the housing crisis. That solution must target the massive and quite artificial differences in housing costs between locations. Those differences are caused entirely by variations in the value

of the underlying land. They could be eradicated very simply by collecting this 'location value' for the benefit of the wider community that created it. This approach would also do much to tackle the growing inequalities in

earnings and wealth that exacerbate differences in house prices.

Instead, the government is fixed on a blinkered policy of deficit reduction which does nothing to address the root causes of that deficit. Their claim that 'we're all in this together' rings rather hollow when the super rich continue to reap their ill-gotten gains with impunity; when they clearly care nothing for the plight of thousands of families to be forced out of their homes; and when they refuse to countenance the possibility of changes that would create a more efficient, just and inclusive economy; one in which everyone could earn enough to put a roof over their head.

accommodation because one of its major suppliers of rented housing is withdrawing from the market; the first time in 15 months it has needed to use this option of last resort.

And evidence from Barking and Dagenham suggests rents will rise rather than fall, driven up by people in work but not earning enough to get a mortgage. The dysfunctional housing market makes life more of a struggle for all but the very wealthy, while the poorest are knocked off the bottom rung altogether.

Thousands starved or froze to death during the Highland Clearances. Since then we have seen some improvement in our collective moral concern. People will not be left to die in the streets around Hastings railway station for want of food and shelter. But in 21st century terms, the

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