

SALVATION ON THE STREETS

John Bird should be more well known than he is. In fact he should be a household name and face. Yet he isn't. His work has challenged the way the general public and the government view homelessness in the United Kingdom. He has co-founded, with Gordon and Anita Roddick of the Body Shop Foundation, a publishing phenomenon, *The Big Issue* – a magazine sold by homeless people in order that they can earn an income and regain their self-esteem. It has a weekly circulation of 253,000 and is read by a million. Its philosophy of a good read has ensured its success continues 10 years on from its birth.

It is against that background I met John Bird in the pleasant and everyday surroundings of the Tollgate Café in London. *The Big Issue's* unconventional approach to distribution – being sold through a network of street vendors – has enabled the magazine to establish for itself a niche in the market place. Its content is a diet of feature articles, celebrity interviews, current affairs and news alongside articles by, and contributions from, homeless people.

At 55, John Bird remains undoubtedly a colourful character with a life to match. An ex-offender, former rough sleeper, former Marxist and ex-member of the Workers Revolutionary Party. He has run a printing business and published his own magazines and remains the proprietor of *The Big Issue*. He also has the ear of the government and is a key figure in the International Network of Street Papers (INSP), launched in 1994.

We began by establishing what he considered the definition of homelessness to be.

"Homelessness is not just about not having a home. I mean for instance the old adage that you can take people out of the streets but you can't take the streets out of people is very, very true. We have housed many, many homeless people who have returned to the streets, because homelessness becomes their social orientation. So, for instance you can get somebody a job, get them a house, you can get them clothes, but they still go back and associate with people on the streets, because there their only mates. Also they get dis-socialised then re-socialised as a excluded group of people, and then what happens is that there are stories about homelessness. So they get a job – we get them a job – they go and work somewhere and people stop talking to them, after a while they say 'oh no not that homeless person going on about "I was homeless and I used to sleep there" and all that stuff.' So then what happens is that the whole mechanism of social intercourse is destroyed and is reconstructed in these perverse conditions."

Would you consider a definition of homelessness that was broader? I enquired – In the sense that the key people in London like teachers, nurses, police, who are unable to afford a home. Would you consider that as a definition?

"No I wouldn't, and the reason for that is because I think you can't lump the whole thing together. We need fine definitions and you can't have a fine definition of homelessness. Homelessness is about social, physiological dislocation. It is the dislocation of your spirit, your sense of well being and all that. People, like doctors, trainee doctors and nurses and all sorts of people like that and police officers are priced out of

the market because of the commercialisation of London. You could actually build a million more homes in Britain and you would still have homelessness. Because homelessness is about the break up of the nuclear family, its about the loss of purpose and the loss of a sense of well being in people who are in care and have come out of care. Who are the people who are homeless? The people who are homeless in spite of often what they tell you. They often say to me 'oh well, you know the reason why I am homeless is because I can't afford a home' – sod that! The reason they are homeless is because they have got some social, mental, community ... they're dislocated".

His approach to the problem of homelessness had been made clear – that mass home building is not the answer and in fact misses the point. However, as the interview progressed he appeared to give more and more ground on the role structural changes could play. However I sought to clarify. So you would associate homelessness with living on the streets?

"I would say homelessness is in the hostel on the streets but with a social dislocation which is to do with the fact that a consumeristic society is incapable of instilling a sense of well-being in an increasing amount of people. If you're talking about social exclusion which is something different, then I would include police officers and all sorts of other people who are excluded from the community of London or our big cities because they can't get on to the monopoly mortgage ladder and the reason for that is because of the increasing commercialisation of every square inch of the world, certainly the land. If we built a load of social housing in London then we get the coppers and the nurses and the doctors. We would solve that problem and then you would be happy. If you gave the same houses to the dislocated people I work with they would probably trash them. We got some guy an apartment. Two years down the line he is still selling *The Big Issue*. If you go round his house he is living in black bin liners as though he was in a hostel or on the

streets. It is all a manifestation of crisis, but it's a different kind of crisis. I would rather be a trainee doctor or trainee nurse or copper who couldn't afford to live in London than to be homeless person who has lost the plot and whose mind was scrambled."

I pressed him on the British Government's Rough Sleepers Unit initiative and that during the summer it had been hailed a success.

"I am of the opinion that anybody who intervenes in the social crisis, is part of the problem as well as part of the solution. So me, I am a great geezer for sticking my nose in all over the place and I've helped a lot of people and I have hindered a lot of people. I just hope the hindering is less than the helping. There is no question of success. You can't measure it by success. You can only measure it on a one to one basis. Did you help these people and who did you hinder?"

His "beef" with the government was ideological and around the "change your life campaign" ran over Christmas. He pointed out what he considered to be a few home truths.

"What they have said is that the problem is on the streets. The problems are not on the streets. The problems are in government. Business



**Paul Brandon
meets the
man behind
*The Big Issue***

that create problems in the commercialisation of our cities. The destruction of a sense of the free distribution of education, the free distribution of opportunity. What we've got is people saying I am going to get people off the streets but you won't get people off the streets because then someone else will come along, and then somebody else."

The Big Issue celebrated its birthday on 10 September, with the launch of the book *Coming up from the Streets*. This has coincided with a shift in the philosophy of *The Big Issue* from dealing with not only the effects but also addressing the causes. For its co-founder it brings a new challenge with more focus on prevention.

"I have spent 10 years fixing clocks, mending clocks and now I want to spend ten years preventing clocks from breaking. So it is a major shift in my life. The real problem whether you like it or not is that you have to have a number of responses. You have got to respond to the person who falls down, but you can't pick everybody up, so you have to limit the amount of people. The thing is that the real war, the real battle is the battle to get away from the reasoning of our current governments who will never, never, never accept the globality of the problem. The thing about Nelson Mandela is that he saw the future. With his truth and reconciliation, he said look we can all cut each other to pieces now, we can blame each other for apartheid or we can find social justice and build social justice. It was a great idea. An enormous inspirational man, absolutely, enormously inspirational. The problem is the Clintons and the Blairs then go with the words but don't create the prerequisites for social justice in South Africa."

Do you have any ideas on what the true causes could be? "You have to go back to the fact of the distribution of wealth. Everybody goes on about the nasty capitalists having all the wealth. The problem is that the nasty capitalist is only one part of the picture. The other ones are the nasty governments and the nasty government departments and quangos – whatever you would like to call them – who wield enormous power. You then have the national organisations, like the Stock Exchange which is not really owned by anybody, but represent the interests of a very small selective group of investors. Then you have got all sorts of things like the World Bank and the UN and all these other organisations which have tremendous power. And these organisations represent another estate. There was a time when you could say that governments nakedly serve the interest of their ruling class.

"But now you have a group within the ruling class that is very, very sinister. You have two sections of ruling caste or class, one of them is about government, one is represented probably by people like Kissinger, Nixon and all those people, by Clinton and all those people.



'You could build a million more homes in Britain and you would still have homelessness'

What happens actually is that you have got this group of people who wield much, much more power than any individual group of naked self interest. I don't want to sound too obscure but I think that is the most sinister thing. The globalisation factor, people keep going on about business, the real globalisation in my opinion is the globalisation of a kind of form of world government or its lack of world government, a lack of the understanding of the total needs of society, the fact that we have finite resources of land. I don't think anybody should ever own a piece of land and I am sure you may agree with me. The reason for that

is that it's a finite resource. It would be like owning air. It would be like saying from now only people with an income of over \$50,000 dollars a year can breathe. Its all down to wealth distribution".

The nature of our conversation now took an interesting twist. I pointed out that Henry George is most associated with the collection of the rent of land (public), the income that flows from certain locations and has taken the form of land value taxation. I was to point out later that these values have been created either by the mere presence of community or its natural fertility. It was clear that these ideas were new to him throughout our conversation. However he wished for a debate to begin immediately on land and monetary reform as he felt our time resembled that of America in 1929 with its divisions between rich and poor. He recalled an encounter that conveys not only his character very well but also his approach to tackling social injustice.

"We are heading for a major catastrophe in the markets. We need to be debating the mechanism that create this. The mechanism that creates this are actually social injustice. Social injustice in the end becomes too expensive. It is incredible how expensive it is to keep people poor. Enormous amount of money. I have been to prisons in America. There were these black guys and these Latinos and I was talking to them but they didn't want to talk to me. Well I said 'you obviously don't want to talk to me so I am going to leave, but I want you to know that before I go that you're a lot of scum. But you're very expensive scum. You cost the state \$50,000 a year to keep you here. Wouldn't it be great the next time you decided to rob the guy on the corner, you would be told by the judge you will be given \$50,000 dollars to start an auto repair shop. Instead of investing in your incarceration, we would be investing in your education or opportunity for your change.' I had the most fantastic brainstorming session with all these guys because what I was trying to do was say look let's talk about ways of staying out of prison. There is a predictability about going into prison."

This story demonstrates that he is influenced as much by the philosophy of self help as anything else, sounding remarkably similar to William Booth of The Salvation Army. In 1890 during an interview Booth also referred to the millions of pounds wasted on the poor law and prisons. Echoing Bird he said "I see myself saying to some rate ridden municipality which spends ten thousand a year on its poor, 'Here, give me your paupers and £5,000. Thus I shall look to keep extending my area, and running the thing cheaper as I go on'."

It is important to realise John Bird is no aspiring town vicar. Neither is he on a religious crusade as the word 'religious' is commonly understood. However he does consider himself a spiritual person and be in no doubt he is about providing salvation and dignity to some of the most dispossessed in society. I was now determined to pursue his interest in the ownership of land. Again he demonstrated an appreciation of the issue.

"I believe land should not be in private hands. I think you should borrow it for a generation or something like that because it's a finite resource. It is our collective responsibility to make sure that land, water and air is used collectively properly. You shouldn't own the land you should just hire the right to use it."

He went on to reveal a sense of how the poor get pushed out to the marginal land and its consequences "The poor get the bad land, the poor get the housing estates on the edge of towns, where there are no trains or buses. What you have got to say is that the earth is a limited resource, it can't increase, it's finite, and you have to take the commercial property value out of it."

He favoured any measures that would bring down the value of land, including possibly a tax on land values. However, later on in the interview he made a point of doubting Henry George and his "tax". He

thought that some people are so wealthy and powerful that they would find ways around it. He felt that "If you don't sort out the wealth then you can't sort the land out". He was not yet at the stage to make the link between the two. When asked about the recommendation of a vacant land tax suggested by Lord Roger's Urban Task Force to the British Government in 1999 he responded in characteristic fashion.

"I advocated something different. I advocated going back to 1946. General de Gaulle and his government brought in a kind of tax in a way. If a property was empty for more than two years then it fell into common use and was taken over by the council. Two years was considered long enough and there was enormous shortage of housing in France."

More than anything our encounter revealed the need for him to debate these issues and as he would later admit he does not have anyone to really to debate these kind of issues with. Time was running out so I unfortunately could not tie up some philosophical loose ends, and we agreed to meet again to discuss further. He concluded with some interesting comments following remarks made by my assistant for the

day Lori Osnow that "we need to get way from the ideology of left and right" and "create a new social theory and new social practise".

He also felt he needed a year or two to reflect and "not be the beast of burden that I am". His final and perhaps most intriguing comment referred to the current climate of ideas, as lacking 'oxygen' and again urging the need for a debate to begin. This insight followed from something he had recently read about what cancer was, that essentially its cells are not oxygenated. I particularly look to see where his interest in this might lead.

He is a man still very much on a journey, one that will inevitably lead to providing more insights into the real causes of the breakdown that he has witnessed in individuals in the last ten years. These years have been about healing and in this sense he is social doctor. The shift to prevention rather than cure is very significant for readers of this magazine. Those of us inspired by the understanding that land, in all its forms, gets its value chiefly from the population and the presence of a community are well placed to offer a vision that is holistic, inspiring and still very relevant.

The Big Issue as land speculator

THE BIG ISSUE has just sold its Glasgow headquarters in College Street for £1.6m. The organisation is moving operations to the Gorbals.

The selling price of the property is more than five times what *The Big Issue* paid for it in 1996. The building is going to be converted into expensive executive apartments. Spokesperson Kate Caskie has been quoted as saying: "There might be an irony, but we haven't thought about it".

Well indeed there is an irony. And if *The Big Issue* doesn't "think" about it, then it can say goodbye to its credibility as an anti-poverty and homelessness campaign force. *The Big Issue* has just actively taken part in the very system that, at root, causes the problems it's supposed to be addressing. So what is happening here?

DURING the period that *The Big Issue* owned its headquarters, the value of the building itself would not have risen much. After all, the cost of the materials and labour required to replace it have remained more or less stable through that time. Certainly there's been no five-fold increase in labour wages or brick prices. And, if anything – the ongoing need for maintenance being what it is – the value of the actual building may well have fallen over those five years. So where has this five-fold increase in property value come from?

The £1.3m increase in the value in *The Big Issue* headquarters is the result solely of a massive increase in the underlying land value.

When *The Big Issue* acquired the site, the area in which it sat was not one that was sought after. The HQ was surrounded by vacant and derelict land. Most of that land was being held, under-used as car parks, by property speculators, waiting for a boom. And the boom has come. *The Big Issue* has joined the ranks of those speculators who are now raking it in.

It is by playing the role of landowner, that *The Big Issue* finds this £1.3m cash has come its way.

But where has this local boom come from? Why this sudden increase in land values? Why the increased development activity in the High Street and Candleriggs areas?

Land values in the area have increased for a variety of complex specific reasons. But, in fact, in general terms, the causal reason for all this is quite simple: there is now competition from Glaswegians to be in the area – to live there, and to have their work there – where there was none before.

It is in fact the presence and economic activity of the surrounding city, and Scotland beyond, that has created these land values.

We should ask: what have these landowners done to merit their new-found riches? By what effort on its own part has *The Big Issue*

brought about this happy state of affairs for its own finances? Well, the answer there is just as simple – by precisely no effort whatsoever. *The Big Issue* did nothing to gain this windfall – it just happened to be sitting there when the boom came.

It may be a pleasant irony that one of the beneficiaries of these speculative gains will be an organisation dedicated to helping those in society less well off. But the fact remains that, whether legitimised or not by our iniquitous land tenure and taxations systems, such increased land value is created by the presence of the whole community, and not by the landowner. The value is, therefore, rightfully, the property of the whole community.

Land values are at present privatised in Britain – but it was not always so. Nor can it remain so for long, for the privatisation of what economists call the "rental income" of the land (and all other natural resources) is actually the root cause of the very thing *The Big Issue* exists to eradicate – poverty. And homelessness – commonly as an effect of poverty – is linked in closer still.



Peter Gibb
reports from
Glasgow

POVERTY in the world is caused by the iniquitous effects of our systems of wealth distribution. The usual response of many trying to eradicate poverty – such as *The Big Issue* – is to argue for counter-systems of wealth re-distribution. They attempt to mitigate or counteract what they resignedly accept as a "natural" and inevitable result of our harsh economic systems.

But such efforts, we are constantly disappointed to see, inevitably fail. Re-distribution, as a principle strategy for ridding the world of poverty, will never work. We must look again at the primary system of distribution. For it is there that the problem lies.

The enduring answer to poverty must be in ensuring that each human being is granted equal access to our common resources, so that each and

every one of us has a way to prosperity. The practical means of bringing this about is the replacement of our current poverty-creating taxation system, with a radical system of land value taxation, linked to a "citizen's dividend".

The Big Issue has been lucky. Its windfall will no doubt greatly benefit its charitable work. But that must not blind us, or it, to the underlying wrong of what is happening here. *The Big Issue*, of course, is simply acting rationally and intelligently within the given system. But that system must now be radically reformed.

The Big Issue must "think" about what has just happened to it. For the organisation has just acted as part of the very system that causes what it's fighting against. That must surely raise some big issues.

The Big Issue might use its unearned landowner windfall to support research and campaign work along those very lines. For our landowners, that would be a delicious irony indeed.