



My father raised eight children on welfare, and didn't kill any of us

Caitlin Moran

My father raised eight children on welfare benefits, and didn't kill any of us.

I feel I should say that, this week. I feel I need to firmly point to a large family raised on public handouts who were normal, and gentle, and never set fire to their house during a personal vendetta against a former lover.

It's weird I should have to, of course – but the Philpott trial seems to have made it necessary. The Daily Mail's headline on the case, after the 'guilty' verdict, was 'VILE PRODUCT OF WELFARE UK': a profoundly odd summation of the case to have chosen. When Harold Shipman was convicted of killing over 250 patients, the headline wasn't 'THE DEADLY PROFESSIONAL CLASSES'. Likewise, the headline on Fred West was not a succinct 'EVIL BUILDER' – odd, given that both Shipman and West's professions actively facilitated their crimes, as they visited helpless patients, loaded with poisoned syringes, or buried shattered bodies under the patio.

The Philpotts' crime, on the other hand, was not abetted by Mick Philpott (and only Mick Philpott: his co-accused, Mairead Philpott, worked, as a cleaner, in a hospital) being unemployed and financially reliant on benefits. His crime was not facilitated by 'Welfare UK' because – and forgive me for being brutal – Philpott set fire to his house full of children outside normal working hours. This was manslaughter carried out in a sociopath's leisure time, as so much sociopathic manslaughter is.

Was Philpott's preceding day – of idleness, subsidised by taxpayers – a contributing factor to his later crime? How Mick Philpott had spent the day – either working, or not working – cannot logically be said to have a bearing on the terrible things he did that evening. If people who had spent years without

employment were more likely to burn six children alive, then every pensioner in Britain would be a ticking time bomb – likewise every stay-at-home mother, and carefree man-about-Mayfair with a private income. Mick Philpott's lifetime on benefits did not make him stupidly, accidentally kill his children.

But it's odd how many people think it did. It's odd how much the Philpott case revealed not about the exceptional, abnormal, unparalleled Mick Philpott – with his two lovers, both taken when lonely teenagers; his brutality; his taste for cheap publicity; his seventeen children; his caravan in the driveway, for sex – but about the people who commented on it, instead. It says a great deal to me that some people looking at this case saw it as, primarily, a failure of the Welfare State. Indeed, not a failure of the Welfare State, but the direct fault of the Welfare State.

To be brutal again – forgive me: it has been a brutal week – but how distant and cold is your gaze for this to be the thing that makes you burst into speech? This little bit of politics – your hobbyhorse; your repetitive, slightly drunken dinner-party speech, as the port comes out – running next to the pictures of the burned bedroom, and the small, sad window that could not be broken in time?

Mick Philpott had been convicted of stabbing a previous lover twenty-seven times; he beat his mistress, Lisa Willis, with a plank, and then torched a house full of sleeping children, out of spite. How exactly he paid for the knife, the plank and the petrol seem as wildly inconsequential as what he was wearing, or the fact it happened in Derby.

I will be honest with you – when I look at the Philpott case, I, too, see 'the product of welfare UK'. I see 'The State'. I see its mark as assuredly as the Mail does. But do you know what 'welfare UK' I see? I see Philpott's surviving children, healthy and well-nourished because benefits fed them, attending school, and with some chance of a future, because the state paid for it.

I see the women's refuge that Lisa Willis was able to go to when she left her abusive partner – paid for by the state. I see a man who was given free legal representation during his manslaughter case – so that everyone in the country knew justice had been done.

I saw that while evil operated in the centre of all this – a terrible, destructive, manipulative man – every innocent around him was helped, and aided, and was never abandoned, and had somewhere to turn, because of 'welfare UK'.

For that is why the Welfare State was created – to undo wrongs, to help the helpless, even as strong men rage to destroy them. Anyone inclined to berate 'welfare UK' should consider, for a moment, what would have happened to that women, and those children, in Victorian times, before Beveridge and Attlee.

Because if you believe that the slums then were not filled with men exactly like Mick Philpott – but whose children starved, and

whose wives stayed, beaten, in the house – and that it is only ‘welfare UK’ that has now created them, I fear the history my father taught me, during his long, ‘idle’ days on benefits, was far more comprehensive than yours.

Taken from *Moranifesto* by Caitlin Moran.