

## New Britain—A Nation Of Victims

Frank Furedi

The debate on victimhood often takes the form of a duel between those who demand greater awareness from society for an ever-expanding range of victims and those who question this approach, particularly on the ground that such claims call into question the very meaning personal responsibility. Recent events in Britain indicate, that the cult of vulnerability goes beyond the terms of the existing debate. This cult has emerged as a key element in a moralizing project that touches upon every aspect of social life. The events surrounding the death of Princess Diana showed how significant sections of the British population have been touched by the cultivation of public emotion. Less than two months after Diana's death, the British reaction to the guilty verdict against Louise Woodward indicated that there was still plenty of spare emotion in support of yet another "heroine-victim." These events also demonstrated that when politicized, the culture of victimhood can become a powerful force.

For the new political class of Britain, the death of Diana provided an opportunity for both mourning and celebrating. "I want to begin by saying how proud I was to be British on Saturday," Prime Minister Tony Blair told his audience, a week after Diana's funeral. For Blair's team the funeral was not just a tragedy to be mourned, but an opportunity to celebrate a new sense of national unity. New Labour has gone out of its way in the past couple of years, to identify itself with Diana and the kind of sentiments she stood for. Now it stood to reap the benefits. It could claim that

in some sense New Labour was creating a New Britain. The media in the main reflected this tone of self congratulation. "More open and tolerant, less macho and miserable. Welcome to New Britain" was title of a major feature article in *The Guardian*.

The public mourning for Princess Diana was widely celebrated as confirming the ascendancy of the spirit of "let it all hang out" California over "buttoned-up" Britain. From Tony Blair's emotional statement of grief for the "people's princess" to Charles Spencer's electrifying funeral oration, the virtues of open displays of feeling triumphed over the traditions of the stiff upper lip. Philip Dodd of the London based Institute of Contemporary Arts noted that "we have buried the old, macho notion of John Bull and given birth to a new, more feminine identity." Other commentators agreed, and within a week after the funeral, the idea of a New Britain representing a more caring and expressive identity had acquired the character of an incontrovertible truth. Promoters of the New Britain contend that the shift in the border between the public and the private is a step forward for the nation and is therapeutic for individuals coping with bereavement or loss.

As a self-styled and glamorous victim, Diana is the perfect deity for New Britain's worship of emotion. One New Labour commentator in the *New Statesman* remarked that Diana's "language was that of the personal, from emotion to pain, from the hug to the smile" before concluding that "in baring her soul, in admit-

ting her weaknesses, in exposing her suffering, she spoke to and touched millions of people." Diana personified New Britain because she not only suffered but also sought to share her emotions with any one who cared to listen. And in New Britain, the combination of victimhood and the public acknowledgment of suffering represent a direct claim to moral authority.

Such sentiments are reinforced by intellectual currents which advocate an emotional agenda in public life. Increasingly the term "emotional illiteracy" is directed towards anyone who is not prepared to display sufficient sentiment in public. In the aftermath of Diana's funeral, a campaign called Antidote was launched to educate politicians in the art of emotion. It is worth noting that these days, emotional illiteracy is often a label assigned to those who are deemed to rely too much on logic and reason.

Although a handful of public figures and commentators have reacted to the more grotesque manifestations of Britain's mourning sickness—Yvonne McEwen and Raj Persaud to name a few—very few have been prepared to stand up for the primacy of reason over emotion. Indeed many otherwise intelligent thinkers are still in a state of shell-shock and are at a loss to explain how the cultural and political landscape in Britain changed so suddenly.

In fact the New Britain of emotion did not arise overnight. The reaction to Diana's death might be described as "unique," but in fact it fits into a pattern of disparate events over the past couple years which have been turned into national carnivals for a community that can only define itself through suffering. For some time now, the British political community has adopted "unity through suffering" as one of its unspoken slogans. This pattern can be clearly seen in relation to a number of tragic events during the past decade.

In April 1989, a panic crush among football fans in an overcrowded section of the stadium in Sheffield led to almost 100 deaths among supporters of the Liverpool football team. This tragedy clearly shocked the nation but it also unleashed a massive display of grief and emotion on the streets of Liverpool. For its part, the media quickly picked up this novel display of emotion and helped transform grieving into a collective public event. At the time, only a few prescient observers noted that the transformation of private grief into a public display of emotion was a relatively unusual development in British society.

The death of Labour Party leader, John Smith in 1994 indicated that transformation of a tragic death into a public occasion was well on the way to becoming institutionalized. Whereas previously the death of

leading politicians was treated as low key, even routine affairs, the passing away of John Smith became an occasion for high profile public grieving. Politicians of all parties vied with each other to demonstrate the depth of their grief and encouraged the display of public emotion. And the media reported that throughout Britain, people were quietly expressing a collective state of shock.

The reaction to the death of John Smith seemed positively restrained in comparison to the intensity of the public response to the killing of 16 school-children and their teacher in Dunblane, Scotland in March 1996. The reaction to Dunblane marked a major watershed in British political culture. From the outset, this tragedy was discussed in a religious and reverent tone. No one was allowed to discuss this event rationally or with dispassion. One veteran BBC news reporter, Kate Adie was vociferously criticized because her stories from Dunblane were too factual and lacked the emotion that was expected of her. This denunciation of factual reporting by leading figures in the media and in public life was symptomatic of an evolving new political etiquette in Britain. This etiquette demanded that public figures behave as if they were in a passion play and the rest of society was there to make up the numbers. The families of the victims were swiftly anointed as saints—their every word was reported with reverence.

Politicians of all parties visited Dunblane, ostensibly to speak on behalf of the nation. Their intervention also transformed the tragedy into a major political event. What began as genuine concern for the victims and their families was twisted into a self-congratulatory discourse about the solidarity demonstrated by a caring nation. Within a few days of the tragedy, the discussion was about the exemplary way in which the people of Dunblane and the nation as a whole had reacted to the traumatic experience. This public response to the massacre, rather than the killings themselves, became the central subject of media concern. Dunblane was transformed into a moral story, in which for once, in the end good triumphed over evil.

Politicians, spiritual leaders and public figures all praised the public manifestation of grief for the victims of Dunblane. They not only encouraged this response but endowed it with special moral characteristics. As in the case of the public reaction to the death of Diana, the response to Dunblane was converted into a myth about British virtue. Numerous observers emphasized that the public response to Dunblane revealed what is best in the British character. "Our reaction to the massacre at Dunblane shows more eloquently than

anything else could that we are the same people inhabiting the same country," wrote Stephen Glover in the *Telegraph*. For Glover, the experience of public grieving had in some sense become a rewarding one. "We have watched the tragic spectacle," he concluded, "and in an odd way it has become an ennobling experience, as well as a horrifying one." For Glover, as for many other observers concerned with the decline of community, Dunblane represented a flicker of hope.

The sense of social solidarity achieved over Dunblane was interpreted by many as a precursor to a more caring and community oriented Britain. Politicians celebrated this mood and also feared to be isolated from it. A more pragmatic interpretation would suggest, that the political class embraced the celebration of suffering, because mourning had become one of the few social acts that had the power to remind people that something bound them together. At a time when collective reactions are rare, expressions of communal suffering are just about the only manifestations of national unity on display.

The decline of solidarity and of involvement in civic institutions is well advanced in the United Kingdom. Commentators frequently point to people's growing disenchantment with Britain's political institutions. The Conservative Party, which is one of the central pillars of the establishment, reflects this pattern of declining authority. The party that claimed 3 million members in the 1950s is now down to 756,000 and is losing 64,000 a year; the average age of members is 66. New Labour under Tony Blair has won back some of its membership. Nevertheless, the fact that the average age of this party's membership is 43 indicates its isolation from the younger generations.

It is not just political institutions that are experiencing a decline in active support. British trade unions have lost considerable influence. Union membership has declined from the 1979 peak of 13 million to under 7 million in 1996. A similar pattern of declining popular involvement is repeated in relation to virtually every public institution. The National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Mothers' Union and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds have all seen their membership fall by nearly half since 1971. The Red Cross Society, the British Legion, the RSPCA, the Girl Guides and Boy Scouts have all suffered major falls in membership over the past twenty years. Not even relatively recently established organizations, like the Green Party are immune from these trends.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, with British people feeling so fragmented—the ritual of grieving provides one of the few experiences that create a

sense of belonging. That is why so many commentators and politicians were so pleased that people who do not normally react together appeared to be saying similar things in relation to Dunblane. From this perspective, Dunblane became not so much a tragedy but an affirmation of Britain at its best. The question that was rarely posed was "what kind of society needs the murder of 16 children to get a common public reaction." Instead, the combination of suffering, emotion and solidarity was imprinted on the British political imagination.

### **Building Community Around Suffering**

The politicization of grieving in Britain has been intimately linked to the institutionalization of vulnerability. Virtually every shade of political opinion and the entire British establishment has endorsed this project. In August 1996, the queen announced that she had commissioned a memorial to be erected alongside the tomb of the unknown soldier inside Westminster Abbey. The new memorial was to be devoted to the suffering of the unknown victim. This gesture towards the spirit of the unknown victim by the British royal family was very much in keeping with the promotion of the culture of victimhood on both sides of the Atlantic. In a strange twist of fate, a year later, the monarchy would be haunted by an all too well known victim inside Westminster Abbey.

The royal family's promotion of the unknown victim indicated that in the aftermath of Dunblane, the moral claims of victimhood was in the ascendancy. The ground on which victimhood represents a moral claim is not what you did, but what has been done to you. Such morality reflects a society, where human action is often regarded with distrust and where suffering is one of the few experiences with which everyone can feel comfortable. Suffering is increasingly equated with authenticity and has replaced conscious action as the experience of real meaning. Suffering is depicted as having some purpose for which one is entitled to be rewarded or compensated.

Today, British society actually encourages those who suffer to discover some meaning in their experience. The media continually portray personal tragedies as moral plays, where a victim's loss is endowed with special significance. Thus whenever a tragedy strikes, a member of the family invariably remarks on television that they hope that their loved ones have not died in vain. A tragic death is quickly transformed into a cause. Swiftly, a charity is set up to make sure that others learn the lessons of the tragedy. In this way, death—which has no intrinsic meaning—is given a

moral significance by representing it as a warning to others. This ritualization of suffering has become the main sphere of social experimentation in British society in recent years.

Critics of the culture of victimhood often direct their fire at its more mendacious and self-serving manifestations, such as the predictable demand for compensation or the evasion of responsibility for the outcome of individual action. There is, however a more profound issue at stake. The celebration of the victim identity represents an important statement about the human condition. It regards human action with suspicion. It presupposes that human beings can do very little to influence their destiny. They are the objects rather than the subjects of their destiny. Consequently the human experience is defined by not by what people do but has happened to them. The world of the victim is one where individuals exist in a continuous passive relationship to their experience. It is the ability to suffer rather than to exercise control over one's life that becomes valued by this outlook.

In the past, people who suffered from a particular violent experience did not identify themselves as victims. This was not because they did not suffer, or because they did not carry their scars with them for life, but because the experience was not seen as identity-defining. People regarded them as unfortunate incidents but not ones that defined their existence. In contrast today, when many people have problems working out where they belong, the experience of suffering acquires a new significance. And society encourages those who suffer from a crime or tragedy to invest their loss with special meaning.

As Joel Best noted in the pages of this publication, many of the original advocates of victims' rights came from the political right. (*Society*, May-June 1997, p.10). It is worth noting that although many critics of victim culture are from the right, they rarely explore the uncomfortable question of why the institutionalization of victim culture took off in the 1980s—the era of Reagan and Thatcher. It seems paradoxical that the decades known as the “greedy eighties” in Britain, was also the time when victims really came into their own. The institutionalization of official support for victims took place under the reign of Conservative home secretaries in the United Kingdom. The *Victim's Charter*, published in 1990 by a British Conservative government, illustrates the importance which the political right has attached to this issue.

However, the advocacy of the cause of the victim is by no means restricted to the political right. Many of the initiatives surrounding this issue were launched

by people who identified themselves as feminists, leftists or liberals. During the 1960s and 1970s left-wing politics underwent a major transformation. Confidence in social change and experimentation was undermined by events. During this period many of the left's allies, whom it regarded as agents of change, began to be seen as victims. The literature on the working class illustrates this shift. Workers, who were hitherto portrayed as a powerful force of change, were increasingly represented as victims of forces beyond their control. A parallel process was in evidence in the women's movement. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists argued vehemently against the representation of women as victims. By the late 1970s, this perspective was fundamentally revised. Campaigns now stressed the woman victim—battered, violated, raped. Indeed, the perception that all women were potential victims emerged during this period.

The shift towards the victim in left-wing and feminist discourse reflected disenchantment with people as subjects of change. More and more people came to be regarded as being in need of “help” or “empowerment.” Most of the new ideas about victimhood came from this quarter. Unlike traditional conservative contributors, who treated individuals as victims of evil, feminist and leftist writers portrayed them as victims of a system of patriarchy. But although there were differences in the interpretation of aspects of the problem, there was a shared assumption that people are victims.

It was this unexpected ideological convergence between left and right around the celebration of the victim, which has given this cult so much influence in British society. During the past decade, politicians were falling over themselves to embrace the cause of a particular group of victims. Some opted for the victims of street crime whilst others took up the banner of the casualties of male violence. As it turned out Blair and his team were much better at playing the victim card than their political opponents. In particular they could blame the existing establishment for being insensitive to the suffering of those without power. Although the politicization of emotion is populist in form, it is actually orchestrated by the new political elite of Britain. New Britain thus means a major shift at the top of society, with the triumph of the New Labour elite and its values over the old British establishment.

It was the erosion of what are often called traditional moral norms that created the condition for the triumph of the politics of emotion. At a time when there is a lack of consensus in British society about many of the basic questions facing people, upholders

of tradition have been placed on the defensive. Many commentators have noted the absence of agreement on even some of the fundamental issues facing society. Ideas about what constitutes an appropriate form of family life or what is acceptable as opposed to criminal behavior are continually contested. This feebleness of shared values has contributed to an atmosphere of ambiguity and doubt. The marginalization of traditional morality has created a demand for new ways of expressing right and wrong. The cult of vulnerability represents a provisional response to this demand. Through its ability to transcend the ideological divide—the politics of emotion has become the point of reference of the political culture of the New Britain.

### A Tyrannical New Religion

Victimhood has become one of the few causes that British people can believe in. In the aftermath of the Dunblane tragedy, a campaign organized by the families of the victims were continually represented as the “voice of the nation.” Within a matter of weeks this campaign to ban handguns was endorsed by virtually every leading politician. Other victims, notably Mrs. Frances Lawrence, whose teacher husband was murdered outside his schools were also elevated into “expert” moral custodians for the rest of society. So far no leading politician has dared to ask the question of “why should a tragic bereavement confer the right to dictate public policy?” Those who dared to question the demand of the Dunblane campaigners for a complete ban on handguns were hysterically attacked for their insensitivity to the memory of the murdered children.

Emotion, once foreign and unfitting in the public realm, has become an important political resource in Britain. The art of displaying emotion has become a political artifact which is now routinely deployed. Given the importance attached to emotion, it is inevitable that those who refuse to humble themselves in public are stigmatized as uncaring, inhuman and aloof. The religion of feeling and the worship of sentiment is an intolerant one. In its intolerance and self-serving piety, the new religion is more than a match for any

fanaticism ever foisted on Britain. Only the immediate emotional spasm has the mark of authenticity and truth, because only it is untainted with what is most hateful to new religion—reason.

During the events surrounding Diana’s death, it became evident that grief was not a matter that could be left to the individual conscience—it became a compulsory manifestation of Britishness. The term “the national mood will not tolerate it” was used more than once by politicians and journalists to denounce actions of which they disapproved. When Walter Bagehot wrote in the nineteenth century, that in politics sentiment triumphs over reason, he believed that this would be to the benefit of the monarchy. Paradoxically today, it is the British royal family who were the most conspicuous casualties of the new politics of emotion. New Labour and its supporters successfully manipulated the mood of national mourning to secure their own authority. From the queen downwards, the old establishment simply crumbled and gave in to every one of their demands; lower that flag, launch that charity, show remorse and humble yourself in public.

The current elevation of emotion over intellect is a symptom of a society that, having lost confidence in itself, not only turns its back on its achievements but also seeks to feed off its tragedies. Britain has not only lost Diana. If recent experience is anything to go by, it may have also lost something more important: the belief that what matters is what you do, not how much you say you suffer.

---

### SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Joel Best, *Threatened Children: Rhetoric and Concern about Child-Victims*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear, Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectations*. London: Cassell, 1997.

---

*Frank Furedi is Professor of Sociology in Darwin College at the University of Kent, Canterbury, England.*

Copyright of Society is the property of Transaction Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.