

Street Weapons Commission – London

Iain Duncan-Smith MP

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Can I welcome everybody today to the second of a series of five public hearings by the Channel 4 Street Weapons Commission? I'm Cherie Booth QC. I'm chairing the commission. On my right I have Liam Black, Geoffrey Dear and Ian Levy. And on my left I have Fay Selvyn and Gus John. And welcome too to Ian Duncan Smith. Ian can I start up because we know that you've been studying under the rubric breakdown Britain and in fact are engaged in a particular study with emphasis on weapons and crime. Can you tell me how significant a problem you think violent crime is in the nations cities?

Iain Duncan Smith

Well you have to divide this really into two little components. If compared to America or something like that, it's not. But if compared to our own history of these things then I think it is significant and I think it's a growing problem and I think there's a cultural issue here which is at the heart of this. and that is therefore getting worse in the sense that I think the concept of gangs, street gangs as we think of them, the levels of violence are growing in that. I know people will argue that of course this is quite different from America. And yes it's nothing like as bad as in the United States but if you go back ten years you'd have found it was nowhere near as bad as it is now. And I think what we're doing is seeing a pattern of drift towards the United States there are differences in terms of availability of guns and things that make that slightly different. But you know there is definitely a shift on that. And we're looking at that at the moment and I've had a group of people just come back from Boston and Los Angeles who have been studying the American system at the moment.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

And what about the role of family breakdown in all of this? Family and

community breakdown.

Ian Duncan Smith

Well it's clear the patterns are there that this is an issue particularly for boys although I'll come to the bit about girls later on but its boys who essentially make up the core of most of the gangs. And it's the same in the United States. There are cultural differences between the different gangs. For example the peculiar thing about Hispanic gangs in the United States is that they tend to have quite strong family links and you might have three generations of the same men in the family all in the same gang. So you'll have a grandfather, a son, and a grandson. To be fair the grandfather is probably only about 32 whereas the afro America gangs they're all about broken families, completely. There'll be no links. There'll be individuals, boys who have come from broken homes. So I think broken homes, family breakdown, plays a huge part in setting up the individual. I'm doing a study at the moment with Graham Allan and with the Smith Institute and we're looking at under three children dysfunctional families and trying to figure out how you can deal with those because it's quite clear the pattern of a dysfunction family and a child when the child reaches two and a half you can pretty much predict where they're going to be by 18 and almost no amount of money is going to change that course of action. So early intervention to try and put some of these things right because these are the very boys that are going to end up in the street gangs almost certainly.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Somebody who comes from a broken family of course not everybody who is bought up by a single parent mother is going to end up part of the gang that's for sure.

Ian Duncan Smith

Absolutely right and it's not saying that these are absolutes we're simply saying that the ground is set in the broken home depending obviously in the conditions of that broken home and where it is and to what degree other remedial action takes place to try and make sure that these boys don't end up in those positions. I think there's been a cultural shift though in the last few years. I think the culture out there on the street that for example it denigrates women dramatically now. I mean if you deal with the street gangs they are. Women are goods and chattels in this game. And it's it is really quite worrying the cultural issues surrounding music and the rights of passage that go on in these gangs is very demeaning to women and it's a violent culture that is all about attack first. It's very interesting if you talk to someone like Camilla Batman Geltez who deals with a lot of the street gangs here in London or any of the groups that I've dealt with they'll tell you straightaway that there is almost something physical that takes place in the brain that shifts when somebody enters a street gang. They become they lose any element of ability to socialise. That bit is shut down because that's a very weak part of their thinking. It shows a weakness if you accommodate somebody. The last thing you can do is accommodate. There's a very strict discipline process in these gangs and it's all about if you're not in the gang then you must therefore be outside the gang ergo you are against them. And if you are against them then they must attack you first otherwise you might attack them. So they get their retaliation in and that's the whole idea of why the violence is so heightened in these organisations coz it's mostly built around a fear. A fear that you're going to take them on. they don't see you or me as you know well they're not in gangs. Everything is in gangs when you're in a street gang. And so if you're not in that gang then you must be against them.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

So this is also about community breakdown in fact. The breakdown of a wider

community sense if you like.

Ian Duncan Smith

Well family breakdown, community breakdown, you don't have communities without families and strong families and that's what we see in many of the areas that I've been to. You'll find almost wastelands really of human endeavour where nobody cares a damn about anybody that lives within striking distance of and the kids particularly are in trouble. What was interesting when we did our we think family breakdown is a problem but it's not alone. You know for example what feeds family breakdown. Well you know failure at school is a dramatic thing leading to unemployment. Unemployment in turn leads to likelihood that you will yourself be involved in family breakdown. Debt was the biggest cause of family breakdown we found in our report. So all of these things were interesting and when we looked at education in Breakthrough Britain the thing I found fascinating coz for years and years and years we go on about um Afro Caribbean boys being the problem. I'd never really believed that because first of all there are probably whole swathes of Britain that don't have any Afro Caribbean boys but they do have street gangs. And what we found was that two worst performing ethnic groups in school in UK were Afro Caribbean boys but below them were ethnically white working class boys who make up a vast swathe more than Afro Caribbean boys. So the question is it's not just what goes on at the school because when we looked at all of those we found for example er all the kids on free school meals ethnic Chinese achieved far higher levels. Hindu Asians achieved far higher levels. These two were peculiarly bad when it came to achievement through school and we think that's hugely due to the culture that they receive when they go home. Often going home many of them to homes where education is not valued. Where a process of moving out of your own situation is not valued any longer where it would have been er 20 years ago. Your parents would have seen education

as the way out. It's sort of gone now. And that's all part of the problem.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Gus I think you wanted to take up an issue.

Gus John

Yes I was interested in your assertion that an under class exists and gang culture prevails as a central part of that. In the last part of your response you talked about some structural issues around quality of schooling, levels of educational attainment and so on. what I thin is interesting from what you've said is that clearly you would not accept you wouldn't identify gang members as being predominantly middle class or would you?

Ian Duncan Smith

No for the most part you would certainly not I don't think. There will be some who have drifted into this. I mean I can think of some straightaway that I have met. That I know of. But for the most part the core of this will be made up in the more rundown broken bits of our cities for the most part.

Gus John

OK so then we're talking about poverty, social economic depravation, we're talking about poor schooling. We're talking and then you mention family breakdown etc. but what I'm concerned about is the emphasis is placed on family causes as distinct from these wider structural issues which predetermine peoples life chances.

Ian Duncan Smith

Well I say again and again I don't just say family breakdown is the cause of people entering street gangs but you are far more likely living in an area like this if you come from a dysfunctional broken home that boy is more likely to

be under the influence of that street gang. When we talking

INAUDIBLE ... I know you're seeing him. One of the things that you find endlessly is the attraction of a street gang and I suspect it would have been for somebody like me, any other boy, if you had no role models in your life the attraction of a street gang is like an alternative family in many senses. It offers the strength. It offers the sense of unity and purpose. It's led by somebody strong invariably or a group of strong people. Older. You can look up to them and they are boys or men in this particular case. And so the drift towards this is understandable. If you have a family where when you go home there's nobody there, there's nothing going on. There's no father figure in your life at all and if he is he's a vague dysfunctional character who arrives every now and then with a bit of money then straightaway if the person that you see is doing well. they're dealing drugs or if the gang itself looks strong and unified and you're part of that then straightaway the drive is to push you towards this because this is giving you this formation that you so miss in the whole of your life. and in many cases that is often a very understandable reason why boys particularly drift towards gangs. Boys I mean once described by a head teacher are essentially herd animals. I mean they want to be part of something that others are part of and they can join the gang and that's essentially what it's all about. And so yes it's not just family breakdown. It's, it's lots of other aspects around their community as well.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Let me bring Geoffrey in here.

Geoffrey Dear

Thank you for coming today. You were reported in the national newspaper in August last year as saying that a sense of deepening anarchy hangs over Britain and you went on to talk about the under class which you've just been

discussing with Gus and you concluded that part saying that one of the causes was rampant drug and alcohol abuse and the collapse of any political will to uphold the law. I wondered if you'd like to take that lack of political will a little further for me please.

Ian Duncan Smith

Yes my concern about the alcohol and drug debate is that I think we as politicians have missed the point dramatically. And I think we're reaping some of the rewards of that. I think alcohol plays a huge part in this and I think we have underplayed the role of alcohol. Yes we've played up the drug issue but we've underplayed alcohol. Alcohol addiction and involvement. Kids we found you know 5% of kids between ten and 12 were binge drinking regularly. Once a month now. And we also certain that if a child of that age is binge drinking that early on they're almost certainly going to be on illegal drugs before they're 16. So there is a connection between these two things and a pattern of behaviour it's what they see around them and when I was up in INAUDIBLE you see kids. I remember doing a TV thing and a whole bunch of kids went past. Came back 15 minutes later. This was actually Easterhouse and as they came past they had the white bags and they were full of stuff. And they all went into the broken down tenement behind us, the camera crew were rather frightened by the whole prospect and they drank their way through White Lightning and everything else standing there with vodka shots in it. And they were all under age and they'd been down to the local shop off license. And so first of all the idea of the age limit is not enforced. The police more often than not won't go to that place. And if he refuses them the individual that runs the shop they'll break the place up. Smash it up. So he's got a business to run and so he's frightened of them. So we don't understand the culture in some of these communities that will lead to the easy access to alcohol as a starter so we ought to think about that carefully and we ought to have done more about

restricting access to alcohol. About the price of alcohol. We looked at the comparative early 1900s when we had a very serious alcohol problem in Britain and we brought in things like licensing laws and everything else which sort of dropped it. We were drinking about 11 litres of alcohol per person per year then and under the new regime it dropped in the 50s to about five litres. In the last 15 years it's rocketed up to about ten and a half litres per person now. The access is easy. And it's never been cheaper compared to income than at any other time since the 1900s. So the price of alcohol too is an issue which of course not INAUDIBLE my own party I know but I've recommended we need to look at this from a health point to try and stop young kids getting access to it and getting it so early. And so I think from a legal standpoint the point I was making was we do pass laws but then we're not very interested whether they're imposed or not or whether they're seen properly or we don't understand the cultural reasons why they can't be such is the point I made about the off license on the estate.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Let me bring in Liam here.

Liam Black

In that Daily Mail article that Geoffrey referred to there you cite kids company and you talk that we need to learn from the activities from people like Camilla. We spent yesterday on the Croxteth estate where Reece Jones was killed and who I think would reject very much the picture you paint of their community. And we visited a project there that's trying to get young people out of unemployment into apprenticeships that sort of thing. And this morning we were in Peckham at a very impressive project trying to get young children into something meaningful. Very strongly out of those came the plea about the short term funding, having to waste so much time filling in forms and doing all that sort of thing. If you had the control of this what would

you do practically to enable grass roots, voluntary community based activity that comes to be able to get sustainable funding that isn't obsessed with form filling? Is that possible because without that even good things like what Camilla is doing will wither away through lack of funding?

Ian Duncan Smith

Well the first thing I want to say to you in answer to that is that we published this in July last year and there were a raft of recommendations under the what to do with the voluntary sector. So I hope that can you can have a look at those separately. But a couple of thoughts about this. the first is that I think government and government bureaucracy particularly doesn't think too often that it has too much to learn from people who are not part of the government and that goes for local government as well. And for a long time there's been a tendency to look at the third, the voluntary sector, in a slightly sort of well they can do the bits that we can't do. And if they do other bits well it's only where it suits us to do it. So one of the things I wanted to try and raise with everybody was that you know under the original beverage reports there's a third report that no one remembers and it's about the third sector. And the importance of a third sector as a middle place between private and public that we've rather lost sight of completely. And he warned us about that. and I would recommend everybody to read it again because it starkly tells the story of what will happen to society if you forget about the voluntary sector. The community based sector. So first of all is to recognise the huge importance they could play but more particularly right now what they show us which is people in the community solving their own problems knowing who people are and what their whole lifestyles are about they're much more effective than local or national government with people who are distanced from them. Who maybe good people but simply don't feel and have a reason for setting that community right and ...

Liam Black

Take it we're agreed that they have an important role to play what would you do about sustainable funding that.

Ian Duncan Smith

Well critically we recommend well we recommended critically that first and foremost thing is that all funding to the sort of third sector should be on much longer contract basis. Right now they are battered every time they get these one year short contracts. They're always made to go back through the hoops again every time to justify their existence. It would cost a normal company a lot of money to do it. It literally breaks them. Most of these voluntary sector groups are often quite small and everybody is doing something. There is no chief executive more often than not that sits there filling in forms. They haven't got the time for it. so the first thing is to give them longer contracts when they get a contract so their access to money goes over a longer period of time. The second bit is to open up quite a lot of what government does to a bid process for the voluntary sector so that sections of it could be bid to be done, carried out, by the voluntary sector on a pretty simple straightforward way of doing it. So in other words they will be able to do stuff that at the moment local government is doing. Secondly I think we set too many restrictions around them. I was interested when I went to Connections and asked them about a project they had tried to run for sports activity in the community. And as you know they're meant to be doing this stuff, encouraging, and I said well what are you doing? They were laid aside over a million pounds to help in the northeast London to get football teams and things going. And they said they were surprised and they eventually had to stop the project because they didn't have enough people bidding for it. And I said well what were the criteria you laid around the bid? Well they had to have full liability insurance. And everyone had to have full personnel checks completely and these had to be presented to them in time

for the bid. And I said no one is gonna bid for this stuff because first of all they're already running the odd football team here and there on a Sunday so he's still by the way going to be running a football team next week. The difference is they might have been able to run three or four football teams but you have simply stopped them getting access to this. So common sense. And the reason why the civil servants are petrified that someone is going to come to them and say well you gave that money to them and it failed. And that's the other bit. We've got to be prepared to risk a little bit of failure here. You know if you think about.

Liam Black

So you're prepared for the Daily Mail to attack you when you loosen those ties?

Ian Duncan Smith

I think there's a big cultural shift here. We have got to be brave enough and bold enough to say you don't gain anything unless you risk a little bit. And the fact is when it comes to small businesses we bend over backwards to give small businesses tax exemptions, special areas free of local vat or whatever happens to be. You hear the Chancellor all the time saying we're going to benefit the small businesses. We bend over backwards and we risk tons of money with small businesses and the majority they go out before the first two years. When it comes to the voluntary sector no one wants to take a risk with them at all. And they're just like small businesses in a sense they're run by notchy awkward people who are driven, ambitious, but ambitious not in a financial sense for their communities. We ought to be able to say well we can take a few risks with these people. Let them let them run a bit and if this thing goes down OK. But there's going to be more starting up. And that's the whole point about community regeneration. There's a lot of flowers will bloom. Some will die. But you've just got to recognise that those that are

left are going to have a fantastic effect.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Thank you Ian Duncan Smith that gives us great food for thought. Thank you.

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