

It's the 'great noticing', as right-wingers accept that 'Britain is broken'. But their fixes won't make it any better.

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The Guardian

18th September 2023

After years spent dismissing progressive concerns, Tories want to highlight national decline, but to accept no responsibility.



Girl Who Boys Can't Hear was a recurring character who featured on The Fast Show. She is a woman in the company of men who raises an intelligent solution to a problem, or makes an insightful observation, only to be ignored entirely. A few seconds after she has spoken, a man says something to the effect of "Oh I've got it!", and repeats what she has said verbatim. The group of men immediately spring to agreement and admiration of his input. The woman then says: "Sorry, can any of you actually hear me?"

The sketch always raised a laugh even though you knew what was coming. What elevated it every time wasn't the punchline, but the elaborate performance of the men – earnestly scratching their heads at the problem, studiously pretending

to come up with an answer after the truth-telling woman has already given it, and then cheerfully bonding in the pleasure of one of them finding the solution. The past few weeks in news and political analysis have reminded me often of this performance. Suddenly, there is a lot of hearing of things that were previously said, just not by the right people. Britain, it appears, is broken.

Among those who now have got it is the Spectator, which last week ran a cover that declared “Broken Britain”, and offered its writers’ explanations for “what went wrong”. The magazine has been joined by others that are now also easy of hearing. Only a few days earlier, the Telegraph had told us that “Britain is broken – and nobody can be bothered to do anything about it”, then shortly after that “Broken Britain exudes dysfunctionality”. In the same period, the Sun’s Harry Cole looked hard at the tea leaves, and concluded that “there is a sense” that things are not working in the country at the moment. All around, right-wing journalists and publications who have cheered on and defended the government’s excesses and Brexit extremism for many calamitous years are now sorry to report, like Lucky Jim arising with a colossal hangover, that things are bad.

The realisation is abrupt, and so the onset of the problem must also have been pretty rapid. That’s why we are being told not only that things are bad, but that the problems have accelerated with astonishing speed. The timing for that acceleration seems to be the precise moment the joint Brexit/Boris Johnson project folded. “Roads, railways, schools, GP services, hospitals, airports, housing, borders, prisons and anything involving call centres,” the journalist Isabel Oakeshott tweeted. “All these things are broken in Broken Britain. The speed and depth of national decline is breathtaking.”

The “Great Noticing” is what some have coined it on Twitter – a new era when pointing out Britain’s problems is no longer “doing the country down”, or “sabotaging Brexit”, but a fresh realisation that must be communicated with appalled urgency. There can be no admission that Britain’s decline has a history – at a pinch that, if it does, it must be very short indeed, starting perhaps with the hopeless Rishi Sunak, who has had the bad fortune of being the last one standing when the music stopped. The collapsing concrete in our schools, the sewage in the water, the NHS waiting lists, the expensive trains and poor service, these all must have come about at “breathtaking” speed. For it to have

happened any more slowly than seemingly overnight would extend the decline's roots to, well, everything – to austerity, to privatisation, to deregulation, and of course, to the very people who bet the farm on Brexit and Johnson, and now must make it clear that the problem wasn't their poor judgment, but a sort of bad gambling streak that befell the nation.

But this new clarity about how it all went wrong is not just a cynical exercise in distancing from failure. Some things are genuinely being revealed to some for the first time. The pain has finally reached those who previously did not register the experiences of those living in mouldy social housing, queueing for food banks and sending their children to school hungry to seek scraps from dinner ladies. The decline didn't intensify, it just expanded into a higher tax bracket. Inflation, higher interest rates and Liz Truss's economic adventurism have been the trigger. Higher prices – of energy, mortgages, childcare, consumer goods, travel – are now lapping at the gates of those who had so far been ringfenced from the sort of government recklessness and dereliction that others have endured for years.

Another reason why things feel biblically doomy at the moment is a mysterious phenomenon known as the linear passage of time. The consequences of government policy do not become apparent overnight, but certainly begin to take shape over more than a decade. Bad concrete will not crumble the day after it has set. Defunding community centres and youth services does not turn those who needed them feral in a day, but transfers the burden of injured and vulnerable children to schools and hospitals. The sewage isn't new, there's just more of it, because when the budgets of monitoring bodies are reduced, water companies begin to get wise to the fact that they can start systematically releasing untreated sewage into the sea to cut costs. Every plague was not an act of God, but a human choice.

And here we are. By the time the consequences arrive they are so vast and systemic, that the only thing to do is sing the blues about Broken Britain. This is useful for everyone. Those on the right, braced for defeat, are now primed and prepared to carry their new complaint of a country that does not work to the doors of a Labour government. Labour, in turn, gets to simply point to the profound brokenness of things and how limiting that is to what it would like to achieve.

You will hear much more about broken Britain over the next few months and in the run-up to the next election. The difference this time, as opposed to when it was said by waves of striking workers, anti-austerity protesters in 2011 and 2015, victims of the Home Office, and whistleblowers in the police, fire service and NHS, is that it will be said by people who will be heard, because they will not demand that anything material should change. They will earnestly scratch their heads about how it came to this, engage in distracting rants about purging woke civil servants and peddle harebrained schemes such as bringing back national service.

At best, there will be appeals, even if the Tories are ousted, to support “sensible” fiscal and border policies with the hope of freezing the country at this level of broken, rather than smashing any more of it. It will all feel a little surreal, if it doesn’t already.

But surely the jig is up. If there’s any solace to be gained from the wretched experience of the past decade or so, it is that the decline has been happening in plain sight for so long, so obviously to those who were willing to see it, that even the most rehearsed performance by those who refused to do so will fall flat. There’s no need to ask if anyone can actually hear you, because it’s clear that the answer is yes, they could hear you all along; it just didn’t suit them to.