

The Politics of Crime, Punishment and Justice:

Exploring the Lived Reality and Enduring Legacies of the 1980's Radical Right

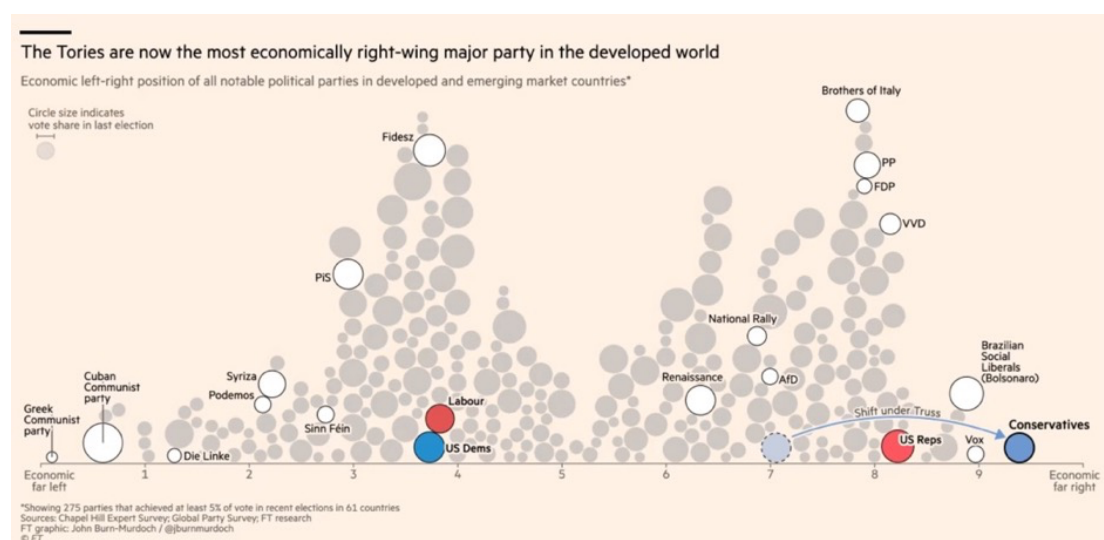
Danny Dorling, draft of: 5th February 2024 (accepted manuscript).

Why did crime rise in Britain in the 1980s? Was it rising economic hardship, rising greed? A bit of both and something else? Was it the adoption of the mantra that there is “no such thing as society, just people and their families”? In which case – why not?

Emily Gray and Stephen Farrall have been asking these questions for some time, as they say themselves, for a much longer period than the key decade in which so much appeared to change. And they ask questions about the questions. Why was it that it that the response to crime rising was different because of the perception of why it was rising? And, in turn, did that feedback and further fuel the rise?

The authors acknowledge that ‘some see Thatcherism as being of limited impact.’ (p.32). But in many social studies this era stands out as a sore thumb. It led to a new kind of politics in Britain emerging later, one epitomised by the Conservative Party becoming the most economically far right of all political parties in all the rich and medium income countries of the world (Figure 1)

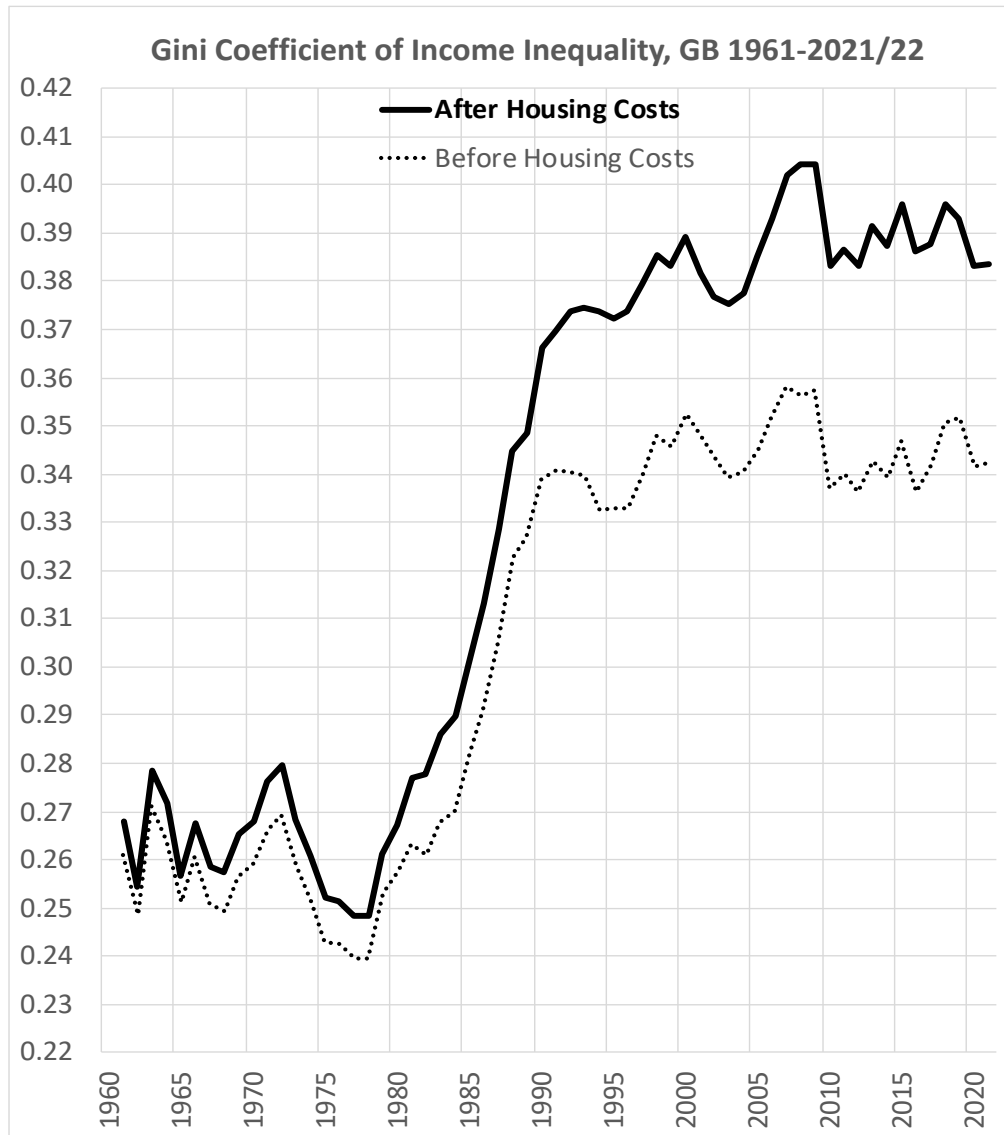
Figure 1: Analysis of the Conservatives that came after Thatcher and Major



Source: John Burn-Murdoch (2022) *The Tories have become unmoored from the British people*, *The Financial Times*, 30 September.

The Conservative party of Britain became unmoored from its social base, as the graphics which the Financial Times began to produce by the 2020s made clear (Figure 1). All this was seen as having been inspired by Thatcher. Every new Conservative leader played homage to her (as did Tony Blair and Keir Starmer). The politicians who came to power in 2010, and then ruled without the aid of the Liberals after 2015, were all Thatcher's children – teenagers when she was in power. And the shift that occurred at that time is very clear to see in the most important social indicator of all – the gap between people in terms of how much freedom they each had and – in effect - how they are respected, which is best measured by what they are allowed to live off – what inequalities are tolerated. That graph is shown as Figure 2 below – which deals with economic inequality in disposal incomes before and after housing costs are paid. It is very simple in what it depicts – and housing is something I want to focus on in what I have to say, because after the huge ramp up of inequalities in the 1980s the two lines in Figure 2 are further apart.

Figure 2 – the rise of income inequalities over time, and the rising importance of housing in that



Graph drawn by the author. Data source: Institute for Fiscal Studies, Living Standards, Inequality and Poverty Spreadsheet: <https://ifs.org.uk/living-standards-poverty-and-inequality-uk>

Before Thatcher came to power the cost of housing yourself was a similar proportion of annual income for rich and poor alike. Because of this the two lines in Figure 2 run almost along the same line prior to 1979. After then they begin to diverge. The cost of housing themselves became higher and higher for people who were poorer as rent regulation was abolished by Thatcher and council housing was sold off without replacement. The poor had to increasingly turn to the tiny but growing private sector. By the early 1990s, economic inequalities after housing costs were much higher than before housing costs.

Housing had not become cheaper for the best-off, other than those who owned outright; but it was much more expensive every month and year for the poorest; taking up a higher and high proportion of their income, and income which was relatively lower compared to the national average each year.

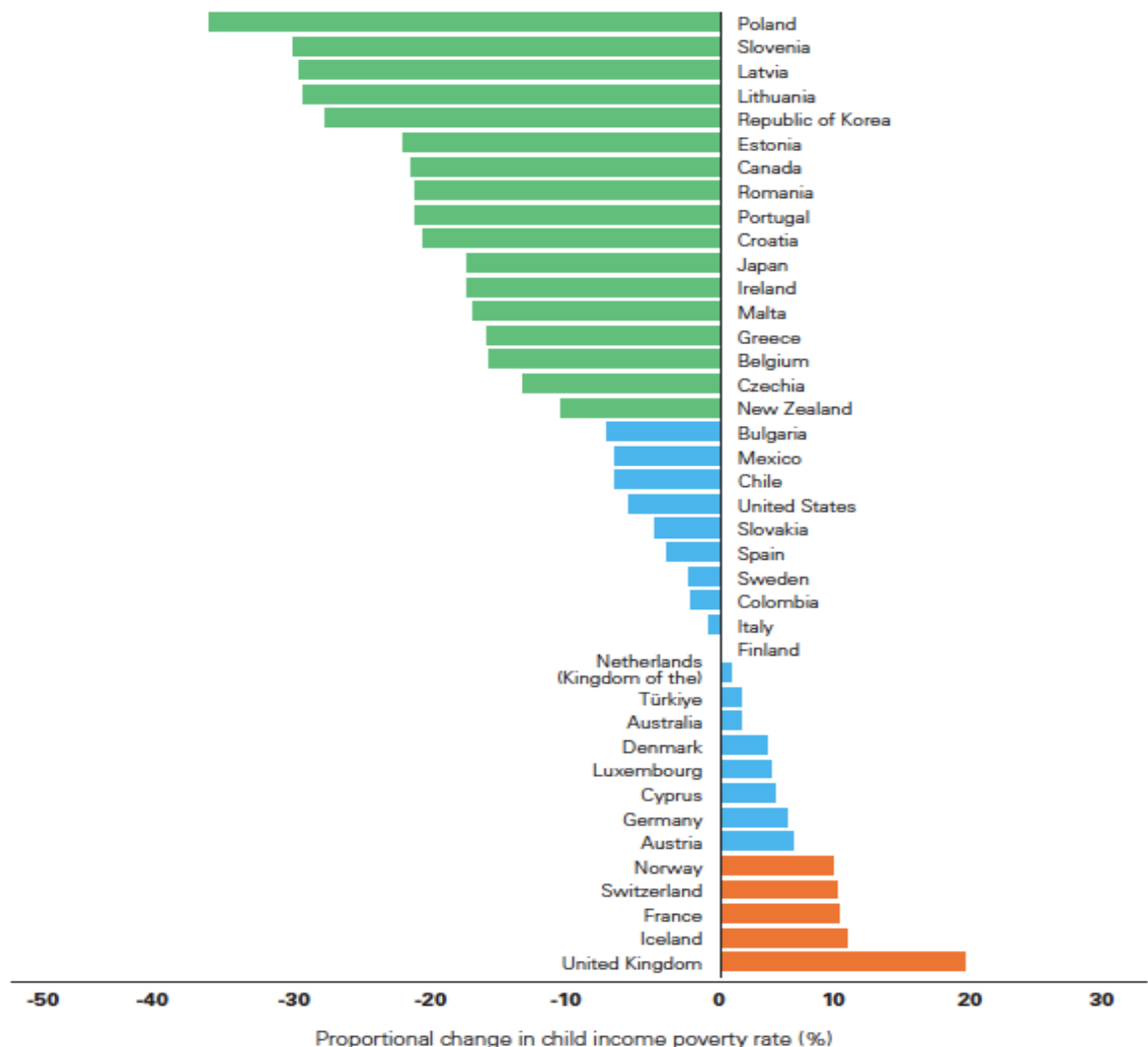
Emily Gray and Stephen Farrall chart the changes in housing policy from the 1980 Housing Act through to various increases in means-testing and the reduction of rights, including destroying almost all British rent regulation, which coincided with an increase in the importance of being on means tested benefited in 1981 at age 23 being associated with an increased chance of 'adulthood contact with the criminal just system' (p. 77) as compared to an earlier birth cohort.

Initially unemployment 'was not a predictor of criminal justice engagement', but it was in 1996 for those aged 26 (p.78). Poorer households used to be burgled less than richer one's in the United States in the 1970s (we do not have the same data for the UK). However, by the 1980s, and especially in the late 1980s people in social rented accommodation were 1.7 times, initially, to 2.4 times, eventually more likely to be burgled at home as compared to those who owned their home or who had a mortgage. Making life harder in poorer areas increased the chance of burglaries in those areas.

Increasing the cost of housing also increased the chances of homelessness, and rising homelessness was partly associated with some of the rise in crime (p.87). The feedback loops can look complex (p91), but they are also logical. Finding it hard to start a family, or otherwise settle down because you could not afford a home because Thatcher's policy was to allow the market to increase the price of housing for those who were poorer meant that '...the delayed transition to adulthood resulted in an increasing number of young people moving into or being "held" in aversive, crime-prone situations and lifestyles, such as "sofa surfing," working and claiming benefits, or working in the "cash" economy ...' (p.91).

Figure 3 – the rise in child poverty in all counties assessed by UNICEF from 2012 to 2021.

Change in child income poverty rates,
2012–2014 to 2019–2021



Source: UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Innocenti Report Card 18: Child poverty in the midst of wealth, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, December 2023
<https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3291/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-18-Child-Poverty-Amidst-Wealth-2023.pdf>

That description carries on to describe a feedback loop that strengthens over time and into particular places and social groups in this eras. So, how does this end? It certainly is not over.

Figure 3 shows how unusual the UK remains. Among all the countries shown in that figure it has the highest rates of inequality bar, occasionally Bulgaria.

That inequality level and the huge amount of poverty associated with it is almost entirely due to the rising inequalities of the 1980s and the fact that they were never reversed, not even slightly in the 34 years after 1990. Yes there were some small changes of tact with the new government of 1997, and that of 2010, but those slight changes in direction were too small to show up in Figure 2 and the crime, housing, welfare and many other regimes that had become entrenched by 1990 remain what is considered normal for the UK today.

This, however, does not mean that nothing changes. For a start detailed age-cohort-period analysis shows that the group that did best out of Thatcherism, the 'golden cohort' born between 1925 and 1934 did worse of all in their very old age. Margaret Thatcher herself was a member of this cohort, born on 13 October 1925. Her age cohort saw larger improvements in their health and wellbeing than that which came both before and a faster improvement than that after, until around the time she died in 2013. In the years around her own death, and through to the start of the pandemic that began in Britain in early 2020, all of that advantage of that cohort was lost and they suffered unprecedented rises in poor health associated with austerity and especial cuts to adult social services for the very elderly.¹

At the very same time as Thatcher's contemporaries began to die far more quickly than older people had died for some time, especially the affluent who used to live longer, their great grandchildren began to show signs of being stunted in height. This was a trend which began for those born around 2005.² It will be for future researchers to pull together and try to understand these new trends – rising mortality among the very old not appearing to come to an

¹ Lu Hiam and Danny Dorling (2024) The rise and fall of Britain's golden cohort: how the remarkable generation of 1925-1934 had their lives cut short by austerity, Review of Social Economy, accepted for publication.

² ITV (2023) British children shorter than other five-year-olds in Europe, study finds, International Televisions News, 21 June, <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-06-21/british-children-shorter-than-other-five-year-olds-in-europe> further information can be found here <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-05772-8> and detailed data is here: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-05772-8#MOESM1>

end, a stalling of progress in health in the young – possible the first for over a century, and the stunting of the grandchildren of Thatcher’s children and rising mortality rates for all children, but especially for those aged 1-4 and the very poor.³

The most recent rise in child mortality that has been reported for England is not associated with the ending of the worse of the pandemic because that would not be expected to result in rises in the age group 1-4; the same age group that have been becoming stunted and smaller in height. Individual news stories tell of tragedy, such as of a two-year-old boy who starved to death in December 2023 or January 2024 next to the body of his dead father.⁴ The same newspaper that boke that story tried, two days later, to blame the death on social services.⁵ But, of course, what social services are available and how much they are needed depended on a legacy that stretches right back to what happened in the 1980s.

What happens next could be a break in the change in trend established in the 1980s, or it could be something new, and worse. Cohort analysis is generally used to look backwards, but it might now make sense, with this much evidence collected in this new book, to now look forwards. ‘The Politics of Crime, Punishment and Justice’ is about much more than its title implies. It uses techniques developed first in studies of health to examine age-cohort-period effects using many large datasets, including synthetic cohorts. It is analytically sophisticated and draws also on the huge literature that has emerged since the 1980s to examine the enduring legacies of the far-right that took power in Britain then. I was a teenager in those years. My memories include the National Front, Britain’s fascist party, shrinking in size because – if you wanted black people to be ‘sent home to Africa’ you knew that the Tories, after 1979, might do this. However, it was not until 2024, 45 years later that

³ Source: <https://www.ncmd.info/publications/child-death-data-2023/>

⁴ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/25386865/bronson-battersby-died-alone-dead-dad/>

⁵ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/video/news/25386724/boy-of-two-starved-to-death-next-to-his-dads-body-after-social-services-missed-chances-to-save-him/>

the Rwanda Act was passed in a form that might make it feasible to deport a tiny number of desperate asylum seekers. It was Margaret Thatcher who first talked of ‘swamping’. That is just one example of the enduring legacy of her party’s transformation under her leadership. A particular kind of racism was partly legitimized (although most people know this is a racist policy). The book also touches on truancy, education, deindustrialization and much more. In all these areas we are still seeing the legacy of the 1980s play out, but now in accelerated form. The UK has more children not at school and with location unknown than anywhere else on the continent of Europe. The British school system is an uncanny mess of academy chain corruption, private school social-segregation, and collapsing school roofs on a scale that again is not seen anywhere else in Europe. And, as I analysed in detail for the work I did for the 2023 book “Shattered Nation”, there was as much if not more de-industrialisation in the period 1999-2019, as there was between 1979 and 1999.⁶

One state in all of Europe had to have the worse political, economic, social, education, health, imprisonment, and housing record across all of the continent. It need not have been the same state that ranked lowest on all these counts – but it was. The blame cannot be laid solely at Mrs Thatcher’s feet. The men who propelled her government to power are equally to blame, as were those who failed to unite the opposition at the time and those who did not fight back later but acquiesced to the mantra of there is no alternative. British history became a sad, even pitiful, story. This book held documents the decline because one day we will have to accept what so many got so wrong.

⁶ See ‘data’ in <https://www.dannydorling.org/books/shatterednation/contents.html>

The Tories are now the most economically right-wing major party in the developed world

Economic left-right position of all notable political parties in developed and emerging market countries*

