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(I give explicit permission for my submission to be published)

Submission to the United Nations Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

A. GENERAL

A right to housing, to a ‘living standard adequate to health and well-being’, is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, article 25.1. There is no greater indicator of ‘extreme poverty’ than that of being homeless. In Britain ‘rough sleeping’ has increased annually over the last eight years from an all time low. But these statistics mask the suffering of millions of poverty stricken people where housing is concerned. They are just the tip of the iceberg. This crisis in housing, and the lack of social housing, has a history. It is the direct result of successive British governments’ refusal to scrap or change out-dated policies detrimentally affecting the lives of so many for the greed of so few.

I am a trustee, volunteer, member and advocate with various charities, associations and organisations. But during this same period, I have been made homeless twice, moved home five times (supported and private housing), and currently reside in a homeless hostel near the British Museum. This submission is from my own subjective viewpoint based on my own experiences and from a London perspective, because, that is the only one I know. There will be plenty of submissions from experts and organisations with a wealth of data, but I thought it important that I submit a personal testimony from the frontline that is homelessness in modern Britain.

So, the tip of iceberg? The government’s definition of rough sleepers is... ‘people sleeping, about to bed down ( sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments). ( Bedded down is taken to mean either lying down or sleeping. About to bed down includes those who are sitting in/on or near a sleeping bag or other bedding)’.

Which excludes anyone on any given night that ends up in a hostel, shelter, gaol, hospital, caravan, squat, an organised protest, whatever that is, and my favourite, a site used for recreational purposes. The government doesn’t include any of those poor souls who, maybe weren’t sitting/standing/sleeping near enough to their bedding or weren’t asleep enough to be properly counted?

The next ‘level’ is often referred to as the ‘Street Homeless’, an expression rarely used by the homeless themselves. This ‘grouping’ includes everyone that the authorities, who should have a responsibility and duty of care to, can’t be bothered to count because they don’t fit their criteria. They are labelled with misleading and patronising expressions such as Sofa Surfers, Itinerants, Non Residential Accommodation User, and/or that catch all phrase, In Temporary Housing. They should also include everyone who rents in the private sector. Over the last thirty years virtually all tenants’ rights have been removed and have no security whatsoever against that ‘no fault eviction notice’ shoved under the door.

The homeless, with varying degrees of shelter, are then divided by local councils into five levels dependent upon the amount of support needed. This level is constantly reassessed and changed. One is the age limit for Supported Social Housing in my borough. It used to be that you could apply for such when one became 55. When I turned 55 the council changed it, just before my birthday, to 60. Last year, when I was 60, they changed it to 65. The charities and housing associations always kept it at 55. but the council made it impossible to apply to them except through their housing department which insists on you being 65... *Catch 22?*

Those with mental health issues have it even worse than the elderly, the council base their criteria on the amount of medication prescribed. Housing officers now think they know better than the expressed medical opinions of the doctors. Of course, what happens is the doctors know this and over prescribe to those patients who still have some degree of sanity left to not take it all, something sadly lacking in the council... *One flew over the cuckoo nest?*

Toadd to this madness, the local authorities are duty-bound to house people before they are actually homeless. But if you move on to the streets before the bailiffs actually physically throw you out; you are deemed to have made yourself intentionally homeless and therefore not entitled to any housing. To understand the inner workings machinations of both local and central government read Kafka’s *The Trial*, ironically I was in a theatrical version while dealing with my local housing department. Sometimes I found it very hard to tell them apart.

All the above is made in the name of ‘prioritisation’. How you prioritise between one human being and another when a basic human right is in question, only my local council knows. This leads to that nauseating phrase, ‘Moving On’, which leads to another equally obnoxious term, ‘Resettlement’, which is a very real policy of social cleansing, starting with the homeless and is a ‘lebensraum’ for the ‘Haves’ against the ‘Have-nots’. Because the moment you ‘move on’ or ‘resettle’ into another area then all your local authorities‘ statutory duties are no more.

B. AUSTERITY

Austerity, or as we call it, ‘bombing the poor’. Because this fiscal reduction of the deficit has caused more homelessness in peace time since the Second World War. The most vicious of the cutbacks can be seen within mental health. ‘It used to be said that one in five people on the streets had mental health issues, it is now said that only one in five don’t!’ There is a nickname for these unfortunate souls, ‘Put-backs’ because, as one later day ‘Artful Dodger’ on the street told me, “they’ve been put back in the community, haven’t they?” The result of the residential mental health care system in meltdown.

Apart from the obvious detrimental effects the cutbacks have had on the poor in health, education and welfare, two have particularly resonance on the homeless. Osbourne, chancellor of the exchequer brought in measures in an attempt to reduce the rent set by social housing providers. For those remaining in social housing, on benefits or working tax credits, this seemed a good thing. But the vast majority of this rent is paid out by the government in rebates to the providers. So, what seems a rent reduction is, in fact, a decrease in expenditure for the government and a decrease in income for the charities, councils and housing associations. They have to make good the loss by cutting back on the quality and quantity of the services they provide. He also introduced a cap on the total amount of all benefits received. With rents in London at an all time high, and with housing benefit always being capped by local councils, many households fled London, others paid their rent and survived on food banks, while many more became homeless. All this could have been avoided by one simple measure that would have reduced the benefits bill and the deficit: rent controls.

C. UNIVERSAL CREDIT

Universal Credit was announced in a homeless hostel in Camden Town called Arlington House, whose famous residents include Orwell and Brendan Behan. I was to live there in various types of accommodation that a private developer with a billion pound turnover, provides in cahoots with the Council, for over five years. It is no accident or coincidence that they chose this location. UC, or the plague as we call it, is an ongoing unmitigated disaster for the poor. Although its shortcomings have been dismissed as mere teething problems there was something deeply wrong with it right from its conception. These ‘bumps in the road’ were intentional and initiated with ‘malice aforethought’.

Most people are under the impression that its aim was to reduce and reform benefits but its real target was Working Tax Credits. WTCs were the best thing that happened for the poor since the creation of the welfare state and lifted millions out of poverty. It was a true credit in that it was paid in advance where as UC is paid in arrears, automatically pushing people into debt, specifically with their rent, and causing increased poverty and homelessness. I have survived and kept my head above water because of it for the last ten years.

Even getting on UC is extremely difficult, if not impossible for the homeless, with its Byzantine labyrinth of a form, coupled with the necessity of providing photo ID, a bank account and having access to the internet. But what is even more insidious is how it is used to intimidate and deny the poor their proper rights. Camden Council wrote to every single recipient of Housing Benefit in its borough stating that they would have to go onto UC. They used another wonderful phrase for this moving on, ‘phased migration’. All 48 residents of the hostel where I live received the same letter. HB is paid by local government whereas the housing element in UC is paid by the government. So you see why the council wanted everyone to ‘migrate’ to UC. But a week later the government announced that everybody in supported housing could continue to claim HB chiefly because the government wants the council to fit the bill.

I do not know a single person on UC who is now in a better place. The vast majority are seriously impoverished. The intentional lack of human contact with the closures of Benefit Offices, Job Centres, Libraries, Citizen Advice Bureaus and legal aid is intentional because, quite simply, machines don’t do empathy.

D. NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WELFARE SYSTEM

The use of new technologies and information processing by governments and organisations is relevant only to the homeless in the negative. The imposition and destitution caused by UC could not have happened without the internet. The vast majority are barely on the radar and their movements, health and habits are out of sight and sound to any algorithm.

But there is an alternative in gathering accurate information. St. Mungos, the biggest charity provider of beds in London with approximately 2,700 souls every single night, commissioned a report on recurring homelessness. They trained a group of homeless people in research skills, who interviewed their ‘peers’ about their shared experiences. It seems that people would rather be on the streets in their local areas, than ‘moved on’ or ‘resettled’ to somewhere that would never, ever, be called home. The launch of, ‘On My Own Two Feet’, was sponsored in Parliament and, as a trustee, I was a part of the interview panel. Whether Government or the local councils pay any attention to the ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors that leads to this vicious cycle is anybody guess. But it seems the ‘old technology’ of sharing experiences, and the subsequent recommendations, are far more effective in finding out the truth behind the facts of our ‘*Brave New World?*’ than any amount of ‘Big Data’ ever will.

E. CHILD POVERTY

Last year I was in a performance at the YoungVic theatre with 27 other persons who were, or had been, homeless. One of my lines was “Last Xmas 119,000 children, yes CHILDREN! were technically classified as homeless in London alone!”This figure was obtained by using the government’s own definitions. What with the poverty in education and health, it is heartbreaking to think that any child, not least the fifth richest country in the world, hasn’t the security of being able to call where they live - home!

But this is systematic of a deeper malice in the way we treat the young in Britain. I always say judge a country on how it treats its children. Under 25.... you’re not entitled to the minimum wage... Under 21... reduced benefits... Under 18 you get no housing benefit at all!... Oh, and by the way, last Xmas the figure for our later day Fagan’s children went up!

F. ‘BREXIT’

The biggest threat that Brexit poses to those enduring the extreme poverty and homelessness and even the general population the UK is one of distraction. Smoke and mirrors are used at every twist and turn of this farcical debate to sideline, excuse or simply ignore the very real break up of the welfare state. Talk of a ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ ‘Brexit’ is irrelevant to the millions of have-nots what ever the outcome, because they know instinctively that things will definitely be getting harder for them.

Also, there is the agreed fact, that whether in the long term it is a good thing or not, in the short term there will be ‘troubles’ which maybe are easy to bare when you have a life jacket, but not if you are already drowning.

... GENERAL (reprise)

The extreme poverty and levels of homelessness has one major cause: the demise of social housing. Right to buy and the privatisation of housing was the biggest capital transfer in history. This capital could have been invested in health, education, increased wages and infrastructure, but instead was injected into the already inflated price of housing, which after the banking crisis , seemed a safer place for capital’s ill gotten gains.

Poverty has now become a killer. Life expectancy has levelled out in the UK and decreased for the have-nots while for the homeless it is 48 for men and 42 for women. I am 61, well past my sell by date, but last year something happened that put my own mortality into perspective. I had been through all the legal processes and was waiting for the bailiffs to come and evict me, ironically from Arlington House. At my age, and with many chronic health conditions, it would be a death sentence. I was severely depressed, diagnosed with PTSD and surviving on handouts and on a long waiting list for psychiatric treatment, which of course had had its funding cut. To say I was suicidal, would be a understatement. So much so, I had started to make plans to throw myself off the roof of Arlington House as a political statement much to the horror of my long suffering Doctor.

And then it happened. I watched the fire at Grenfell Tower burn. I had been there visiting friends many times in the past. But what really hurt, viscerally turning my suicidal thoughts to homicidal, was the way the local and central government treated the newly homeless survivors. It was disgraceful, disgusting and unforgivable in exactly the same way they have treated the poor and homeless over the last forty years.

You will be asked to visit many places on your visit but if you want to see one place that encapsulates the death of social housing and the extreme poverty that goes with it, go there, and please spend some time alone, so you can hear the ghosts of Grenfell whispering, “we died because we were poor.”