

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage.



An interview with the Right Honourable Iain Duncan Smith

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IMFC: *Explain briefly what you mean by social breakdown.*

Iain Duncan Smith: Social breakdown is what happens where a group in society is detached from the rest of normal life and society; the group that finds themselves out of work, for the most part, living in many cases slightly dysfunctional if not some very dysfunctional lives where you find that children often grow up in areas where they never see a positive role model. They often don't see any father figures, they grow up in often broken, shattered families where it is maybe the second or third generation of lone parents or homes that have not had work.

IMFC: *What is the evidence for the average person of social breakdown?*

IDS: The first characteristic is that as an individual they are unlikely to be in regular work. Secondly, they are highly likely to have grown up in a broken family, that is to say a family where one of the two parents has been away either for periods of time or permanently. They are likely to find themselves, more than probably as a result of their failure to be in work, on some form of benefit, some form of state assistance, in some cases a lot of state of state assistance. And therefore they are dependent on the state for both their livelihood and their wellbeing.

You're also likely to find a small but significant proportion live in families which are simply abnormal. That is to say that the parents or parent as is often the case, simply can't cope with day to day life.

From this group you draw a huge amount of your criminal activity. If you look at prisons you can see that the majority of prisoners in there come from broken homes, they come from care homes, they have mental health problems, they have the reading age and numerate age of a child of eleven. They are very heavily into drugs and alcohol abuse, over three quarters of them will be heavy polydrug abusers.

So all of these things become characteristics of their homes, but they're obviously the extreme version of that. Generally what you'll find is a static family dependent on the state for its livelihood and often essentially repeating their problems from generation to generation.

IMFC: *How, briefly, did the UK get into their current position?*

IDS: What has happened over the years, I think, is the failure of successive governments to recognize that poverty isn't just the absence of money. You need to look at what causes people to fall into poverty. And we define this as being five areas that have shown great weakness in the UK.

One is family life. There's been an abnormally high level of family breakdown in the UK, actually the highest level of family breakdown now in the whole of Europe. So we lead the way in that.

We've also found very high levels of personal debt, and we know that debt leads to family breakup. So that's another distinct problem in the UK and that's grown over the years.

We know that the education system has simply not kept pace with this group and too often in many of these areas fails these people. So in other words they're trapped by a failure to have enough knowledge, enough skills to be able to enter the workforce. Thus, amongst a particular group is a very high level of residual unemployment.

And last of all, what you get essentially is this whole flow through to drug and alcohol abuse. We have some of the highest levels of drug abuse in Europe. We have a very serious alcohol problem here and many of those things associated. They are all connected.

So those five issues, what I call the five pathways to poverty, are the key.

IMFC: *You discuss how rectifying this should be a non-partisan effort, because it is something that will take many years, and many government mandates to change. But every party has their own response to things like welfare dependency and children in care, or jail, and wants to implement their own policies. What are you proposing to overcome this hurdle so that each government doesn't bring in a radically different mandate?*

IDS: Well, we've written [Breakthrough Britain](#) and subsequent reports on [housing failure](#), on [problems concerned with schooling](#) and many more. All of these reports that we write are there for everybody to see on our website, centreforsocialjustice.co.uk. What we're asking is that governments look at this from a non-partisan point of view and recognize that the single biggest problem we face is this growing underclass in the UK who are detached from the rest of society where children grow up never seeing anybody really go out to work regularly. They very rarely see a positive male role model in their lives. Gang leaders and drug dealers become their models; there's very low self-esteem amongst women. You see it in your own inner cities; it's not unique to the UK by any means at all.

So, all of this, we have put forward a whole raft of policies, probably numbering over 300 now, that are relevant to dealing with this. But you need to implement the whole lot because they deal with family breakdown, debt and all the other pathways to poverty at the same time. Those five pathways need to be tackled at the same time, not just one at a time.

IMFC: *You cite brain research for early children, showing that some children get off to a poor start because of dysfunctional families. This research is often cited by the daycare lobby in Canada in favour of national daycare--a universal system of publicly funded child care. What would your response to that idea be?*

IDS: Actually the last thing you really want is massive state involvement in this. What you actually are after is much smaller help. In other words, everything has to be centred around the family and around the needs of the child. Of course, the first need of a child is to have a caring set of parents or a parent who nurtures it. During those first three years we know that there are really three areas that are important.

The first is one-on-one nurture and play. And of course historically and even today the best person for giving that, of course, is the mother. So, most mothers that we interviewed and polled, actually those that had to work in that first period, they worked because they had to, because they needed the money, rather than because they wanted to. This wasn't a case of careers for them; this was a case of having to for financial reasons. So, look for ways in which moms who wish to stay at home in those first two to three years are actually in many senses encouraged to do so because they will deliver the best care. Now these are, for the most part, the majority of mothers who are functional.

Where you have problem mothers who have themselves grown up in broken, dysfunctional homes, who are uncomfortable with reading because their English levels are very poor and their comprehension skills are not high, that's when you need some sort of intervention. Programs in the States that they've been looking at and we talk about here are nurse-family partnerships: helping mothers to reset themselves so they're able to help their children properly and where they're not they get the proper advice and support. It's not just a case of shipping them out to childcare, far from it actually.

You should look at the [joint report](#) I wrote with a Labour MP Graham Allen. This report shows the physical effects of neglect.

IMFC: *Of the policy ideas you have waiting in the wings, which do you hope will be picked up by government sooner rather than later?*

IDS: The most important area that I think we're dealing with is the early intervention. It is the recognition by government (I've been to see the three party leaders and I was a party leader myself once; I've seen them all now, the Prime Minister and the other two). And what we try to argue with them, because I've done this report with Graham Allen, who is a Labour MP, he's not from my party, but we've done this because we think this should be beyond party politics. What we're arguing about here is we're saying that there has to be a recognition that those first three years are now the most important years in a child's life. And if you get them wrong, then it doesn't matter how much money you spend later on, you will never put it right.

So the key thing is: we think most of the resources should be advanced to the naught to three period. Yes, afterwards remedial programmes as well and helping young moms to learn if they're heading towards being lone parents that they shouldn't do it and if they do, to try and help them to become good parents rather than just to be teenage parents who are out of control. So, all of this is important, but the key is getting to those children between naught and three.

IMFC: *Canada has some of the same problems as the UK with social breakdown. What words of advice would you give interested Canadians?*

IDS: Do what we've done. We did all our reports and I sent teams of people to travel around the world to look at what works in different countries and to look at what can be proven to have been successful and to see if that's possible to replicate. These are not back-of-the-envelope smart kid ideas; these are ideas that we've seen elsewhere.

All our recommendations are based on things we've seen work in other countries. The early intervention model has been working for 20 to 30 years in Colorado and other places and we've studied it so much. I see Barack Obama has talked about nurse-family partnerships. So, in other words, bring good ideas and programs back, and we're working on those at the moment. Look at what we've been doing and see whether it's possible to replicate some of that in Canada. It is possible, but we need to learn from each other.