

Press Release

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David Cameron: It's time to reclaim our streets

Speaking in Salford today, Conservative Party Leader, David Cameron, will say:

(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

“Today, I want to speak about the senseless, barbaric and seemingly remorseless prevalence of violence in our country.

A violence that takes our families, torments them with suffering and tears them apart.

A violence that takes our communities, rips out their soul and paralyses them with fear.

And a violence that takes our claim to civilisation – our common humanity, the sanctity of life, and the idea that everyone has the right to live free from fear – and betrays it.

In 2007, 27 teenagers were murdered in London.

Fathers like Gary Newlove were brutally killed on their own doorstep.

And in August, eleven-year-old Rhys Jones was shot dead in a car park on his way back from football training.

Nearly five months on, despite people in the community surely knowing the perpetrator, an enormous police operation, and pledges from the Prime Minister down that the killer would be found, he is still at large.

After that tragic killing, I said we had to be serious about saying enough of all this – serious about saying we won't put up with this anymore.

I also said that we cannot let our shock one day turn into a shrug of the shoulders the next...that we cannot allow our horror turn into a dull impotent ache about the state of the world.

But that's exactly what's happened.

Even today the Home Secretary has shown staggering complacency. She has said gun crime is thankfully rare; in fact a gun crime is committed every hour in England and Wales. Since 1998 the number of gun crimes has increased by 80%, and gun related violence has gone up four-fold under Labour.

Our society is creeping slowly, with quiet resignation and muted resistance, to a state of cultural and social acceptance of violence in our country.

Because the violence goes on and on: ceaselessly and repeatedly.

We woke up on New Years Day to the news that five people had been killed the previous evening.

They included two teenagers who were stabbed – one in Leicester and one in London.

A female pensioner who burned to death in an arson attack.

And a man shot dead in Manchester.

Old and young. Male and female. Black, white and Asian. Those who knew their killers and those who didn't.

The culture of violence in our country isn't the concern of any one community, any one gender or any age group...the terrible truth is, none of us know who next will fall, whose family will next be destroyed and whose community will next suffer.

But these horrific and mindless acts of violence are the worst expression of a phenomenon we see all around us.

A growing culture of disrespect.

The attitude that it's somehow 'cool' to carry a weapon.

Straightforward delinquency.

This phrase 'moral fabric of society' is something of a cliché.

But it really does mean something.

It's the idea that your status in the eyes of your relatives, friends and neighbours depended on living up to positive social expectations. And what we see now is a perversion of that.

In many of our communities, a completely different set of social expectations dominates.

Aggression is fêted. Verbal abuse celebrated. Contempt for others rewarded.

The most potent symbol of that is people beating each other up and filming it on their mobile phone.

Last week, writing in a national newspaper, Ed Jones wrote about his appalling experiences living in a street in Salford.

A street, it must be added, that Hazel Blears chose to champion as a success story in the fight against anti-social behaviour.

It started with petty vandalism.

That soon mutated into outrageous racist abuse.

And it ended in a physical assault – and him being forced out of his home.

Order had lost.

Mob rule had won.

This is not an isolated incident.

It's just a particularly vicious clash of an ever-present and unnerving background hum of violence which we have become accustomed to.

People going about their daily lives being intimidated on their streets or on public transport.

Professionals going about their job – to serve, to help, to care – and being threatened in the workplace.

Children with all the potential in the world stabbed outside their homes.

How has it come to this?

Public Space

I believe the answer lies in our social and political development as a country.

We're collapsing into an atomised society, stripped of the local bonds of association which help tie us together. These include community groups, faith organisations and civic representation.

But it's not just about organisations.

It's about attitude.

Too often we seem to retreat from one another, to the safe and reassuring anchor of our homes.

We have built up walls – to keep others out and to keep us in.

Why? Because we've created a culture where it's somehow wrong for an adult to talk to a child causing a nuisance.

A culture where those elements of local authority, a community's eyes and ears– from bus conductors to police officers – are hardly seen at all.

Where the words 'public' and central government are readily interchangeable.

Put simply, we've retreated from our streets into our homes.

And the result?

Our public space – our streets – have been taken over.

Parks where kids take drugs rather than play football.

City centres filled with drunks on a weekend night.

Inner-city estates with armed gangs. For many, these are the real no-go areas of our society...these are the places where we really feel unwelcome, intimidated and unsure.

If we are to take on this culture of violence and crime, it's now absolutely vital that we take back our public spaces.

This doesn't mean creating an army of vigilantes and have-a-go heroes.

It means restoring – and enhancing – all the elements of social interaction and community life which have been eroded.

It means helping make sure kids get both the soft support they need – the love and attention of families and neighbours – and the hard boundaries that teach them there are lines they should not cross.

It's not a question of choosing: kids need both – the soft and the hard – and as a society we have a duty to provide them.

So let's re-socialise our society.

Let's really say enough is enough – we can reclaim our streets.

Government Response

Compare this to the Government's approach.

Two years ago today, they launched the Respect Action Plan in a blaze of publicity.

They said it would “eradicate the scourge of anti-social behaviour and restore respect”.

But it's done neither.

As James Brokenshire's Review of the Respect Action Plan shows, by the Government's own favoured measure, levels of anti-social behaviour have actually increased since the launch of Respect.

In some areas, three quarters of ASBOs have been breached.

Key pledges on Police Community Support Officers have not been met.

And what were once deemed 'essential' projects, such as the 101 non-emergency number, have been scrapped.

No wonder the current Prime Minister is washing his hands of the Respect Agenda.

But that's not all.

He's actually now choosing to ignore the problem of our violent society completely.

He talks endlessly about the long-term challenges facing Britain – but he never mentions crime as one of them.

He's given up. Well, I'm not giving up. And together – we shouldn't give up.

Social Covenant

It's time for a new approach. One based on a new optimism: where we say we can take back our streets and we can build a better society.

And one based on a new agreement– what I have called a Social Covenant..a national recognition that it's not just up to the Government to take responsibility for the state of our nation, it's up to all of us.

Let me set out what these responsibilities really mean.

Government

For a government that is determined to reclaim our streets, their responsibility is clear.

They've got to enforce the most basic principle of communal life: personal responsibility.

That means sending out an unequivocal message about punishment and deterrence. There must be zero-tolerance of knives, let alone guns. There must be a relentless focus on the low level disorder from which more serious crime grows.

Magistrates must be given more power over sentencing. And none of these things will make any difference unless government builds the necessary prisons and trains the necessary staff to run them.

But more important than any of these is reform of the police.

Last month, I got a letter from my one of my constituents.

Like thousands of others, her life had been turned upside down by the simple theft of her handbag.

She got a letter from the police – you know the sort – you've been a victim of crime ... but we are unlikely to catch the perpetrator and the case has been closed.

Thankfully, another police officer, from the police station near to where the crime was committed, didn't want to give up.

PC Matt Gorman contacted her by phone, viewed CCTV footage and even managed to return some of her belongings.

Here is a police officer, driven by the noblest desire – to serve and to protect– working against the machine that preferred to mark the crime down as just another statistic – a closed case before it was even opened.

And make no mistake about the size of this machine that officers pursuing their vocation are up against.

At the moment, police officers have to fill in a form a foot long every time they stop someone.

And making an arrest usually involves four hours – or much longer – of paperwork back at the station.

Police officers actually spend more time on paperwork than they do on patrol.

That's completely wrong and it has to change.

That's why I've placed such importance on police reform.

We need to get our police officers back on the street, getting on with the job they were trained to do and protecting the community they serve.

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This means having locally elected mayors or police commissioners, who are accountable to local people and provide the beat-based, zero-tolerance policing that everyone wants in their community.

It means ensuring Chief Constables are permanently focused on the public's priorities rather than anything else.

It means having a general bonfire of the targets and measurements which the police have to comply with, freeing forces up from the demands of Whitehall and trusting their judgement.

It means saying to the police this isn't a free ride. We'll strip away all the red tape if you reform your working practices.

And vitally, it means giving police officers the tools, discretion and responsibility to go about their job.

Not far from here, last September, a boy Jordon Lyon drowned. Two community support officers arrived at the scene but felt they couldn't get in the water.

Why? Because the rule-book said so.

Well, we've got to start tearing up the rule books and allowing people common sense, initiative, and responsibility in the jobs that they do.

This morning I opened Amir Khan's new boxing gym in Bolton.

It's a great example of someone giving back to his community – using his time and money to get kids off the streets and offering them a new direction and purpose in life.

Some people might argue that teaching boxing doesn't make young people less violent, and that boxing is dangerous. They're wrong on both counts. Better in a boxing ring, than hanging around on the streets...Better looking up to Amir than some drug dealer on the street.

And when it comes to the issue of safety, let me say this: you can't go through life without cuts and bruises.

We got to stop thinking that by wrapping both children and adults in cotton wool, we are protecting them. The reality is we are making them more vulnerable.

That's why I can announce today that I have asked David Ruffley, Shadow Minister in charge of Police Reform, to consult with senior police officers to see what changes can be made to reduce the burden of health and safety legislation on our police forces....legislation that has helped feed this damaging culture of risk aversion and stops the police getting on with the job.

So in the fight to reclaim our streets, the responsibility of government is clear.

To make people responsible for their actions with punishment and deterrence.

And to get police officers out of the station and back on the beat.

Society

But if we are to really reclaim our streets and pacify our violent society we need another big change.....we need another big assumption of responsibility...and that must be by society.

That's because it's families and communities – far more than laws and regulations – that stop crime before it starts.

It's they that teach moral lessons like you cannot enhance your life through violence.

And it's they that curb criminal impulses, and put us on the straight and narrow when we have gone astray.

To me this is what the Social Covenant is all about.

And it's what social responsibility is all about.

All of us saying: this is my country, my society, my community, my street, my responsibility – and I must play my part in making it better.

But look at what's happening now.

We've got parents, who desperately want to do the best for their children and bring them up with right values, but find everything conspiring against them.

We've got teachers, who want to provide children with individual attention, care and guidance so they can make the most of their lives, but find they are unable to.

We've got neighbours, who want to play a part in making their community stronger and their streets safer, but feel powerless in doing so.

And why?

Because we've got a Government that has eroded the control they have over their own lives and sucked their sense of responsibility out of them.

A Government that's continually undermined schools and teachers, overruling their decisions and controlling them from on high.

A Government that's introduced a system of rights that seems to fly in the face of common sense, and makes everyone worried about getting involved in other peoples' problems.

A Government that's presided over a welfare system that encourages dependency, and pays for people to sit on their sofa when they could be out working.

A Government that's built up a tax and benefit system that weakens families, penalises commitment and reinforces family and social breakdown.

And a Government that's eroded local democracy and accountability, creating a vacuum of civic responsibility and leadership.

We cannot go on like this.

How many more parents have to bury their children, how many more neighbourhoods have to be torn asunder, how much more blood has to spilt on our streets before we choose hope over fear, order over chaos, and community over division?

Because make no mistake: we do have a choice.

All we need is the will and determination to change.

All we need is to say right here right now: we will not settle for anything less than a society which is stronger, more responsible and safer.

Just imagine what it could be like.

Imagine a society where families are living together rather than being paid by the state to live apart.

Imagine a society where school head teachers really can exclude disruptive children and enforce contracts of expected behaviour between themselves, parent and pupil, rather than worry about being overruled.

Imagine a society where a man is working for his dole, not being paid to sit on his sofa every day.

Imagine a society where local democracy is re-invigorated and civic leadership revived, instead of communities left without a voice and no sense of accountability.

Imagine a society which harnesses the power and dynamism of social enterprises that are dedicated to social justice – social enterprises like the Salford Lads Club which I will visit later today – by giving them longer contracts and the certainty the need to do the job.

Imagine all this – a society that is re-socialised, re-invigorated, re-engaged – with a criminal justice system that both properly punishes and reforms, and police force that are on the streets and known to the community...and you can imagine just how we can end our culture of violence and reclaim our streets.

So what's it going to be?

More fear, more stabbings, more gunshots and more violence?
Or a vision of change, peace on our streets and optimism for the future?

There is nothing less at stake than the kind of society we want to be.

United in common goals.

Free from fear, aggression and violence.

Stronger, more responsible and safer.

The choice is entirely in our own hands.”

Ends