Reading Time: 17 minutes

Fair warning in advance. My next few posts will touch on politics, religion and society. In part as it's about time that I actually spoke my mind about some of the big issues in the world right now, and also as I'm looking to re-hone my opinion based journalistic skills. Whilst I'm not trying to push a specific agenda *per-se*, I'll be up-front and say that I'm a paid up member of the Labour Party, and whilst I may disagree with Sir Kier Starmer on a lot of things, I do have more left-leaning political views.

Over the past few weeks, President of the United States, Donald J Trump has decided that there is a link between homelessness and crime, and in particular wants to remove homeless camps / tents from Washington D.C. To quote the President's rhetoric himself, he stated in a press conference that world leaders come to Washington D.C. to make deals, sign peace agreements and so on, and they shouldn't have to look out of the window and see homeless camps.

> "The leaders come to our country to sign documents, that the war is over or whatever… You want them to come through so beautifully… You ride down those roads, everything should be perfect.

Beyond the fact that almost certainly all world leaders have access to news via television, the internet or even newspapers, homelessness isn't something you can just push to one side to ensure there are beautiful views in your Nation's capital. As a Brit whose lived in the West Midlands for 16 years now, this is almost the exact rhetoric that former Mayor of the West Midlands Andy Street used to use, 'eliminating homelessness', which may seem like a noble cause in principle, but in reality is a load of nonsense.

In Most Cases, It's Not a Choice.

I will be the first to say that there are a subsection of society to whom living without a fixed roof over their heads is the way they want to live their life. Be it living in a tent, a car, a sleeping bag or whatever. If we are being really blunt about it, we could even define what a house is. I've known a few people over the years who live on a narrowboat, whom either have a fixed mooring, or simply travel from place to place, setting up their 'home' wherever they choose. In many ways those who live on canals have many of the same characteristics

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as those whom are intentionally homeless, but a narrowboat in theory is a ‘home’, which begs the question. What is a home in the first place?

There are plenty of resources online with information about those who prefer to live on the streets compared to a shelter / emergency accommodation. Having been through the homelessness process a couple of times in my life, it’s easy to understand why. Shelters may offer a roof over your head for the night, but often come with a number of strict conditions. From my research into this topic from an American perspective, a number of shelters have religious ties, and sometimes you are expected to prey to a god that you may / may not believe in, and conduct yourself in a certain way in order to get a warm meal and somewhere to sleep. The question as to whether that’s an acceptable tradeoff is something which I’m certain many people who are homeless struggle with on a night to night basis, and for those who feel like they have been cheated out of the system and blame god, or a specific group of people, that choice may be harder. This is assuming of course that there are as many places for shelters as there are people needing them. Often this is either not the case, or to get to specific shelters, it’s a good hour’s walk (When every penny counts, even taking the bus can be seen as an extravagance).

Shelters themselves may not be all that they are cracked up to be, and from my personal experience can change from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Because most people have their ‘life possessions’ on their person when homeless, they may not feel specifically safe falling asleep, only to wake up a few hours later to items being stolen. There are reports of violence, secret drug taking and so on in shelters, but again, this does vary on a case by case basis. In one circumstance of my own experience, you weren’t given a bed, but instead a chair, like you would have whilst waiting for the dentist. Falling asleep in those circumstances would be a challenge for me on a good day, and that’s before I consider my chronic back pain and neuropathy! On top of this, not all shelters have showers / washing facilities. For those that do, there may be queues, the need for something to cover your feet, and again, leaving your possessions away from your person for a period of time. This is not to say that every shelter has an endemic of theft or other behaviour, but in many cases, it only takes one bad experience, or perhaps *just hearing* about some bad experiences to put you off.

Of course shelters are almost exclusively not 24/7, and as soon as the sun is up, most shelters would cart people out. This is understandable to an extent, as many shelters are run by charities, or with volunteers. In some cases people are provided with information of

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where they can find work for the day in countries where ‘cash in hand’ jobs isn’t frowned upon as much as in some other countries; for example in the UK, cash in hand jobs could be seen as a way to cheat the benefits system, which if caught could lead to sanctions / losing Universal Credit claims. In other cases, people often return to what they would do on a day to day basis. Find a way to keep warm (Or cool, depending on time of year), find ways of getting money, and perhaps seek out spots to set up camp for the upcoming night in case the shelters turn out to be full. For many, life becomes this daily cycle, regardless of whether there is work available or not, and of course, the only real way to give yourself the best chance for success in terms of getting a shelter bed / some form of employment is to be in some form of major population area. Being stuck in the sticks isn’t going to help you, and even though statistically speaking urban areas carry a greater risk of crime, for many it’s a risk worth taking.

In another circumstance, I was told the only other option for me was to be placed into a House of Multiple Occupation, known in the UK more commonly as an HMO. Now, I’ve done a ton of research on HMOs, especially as it ties into my research on student accommodation patterns, and whilst HMOs can be useful (Especially if you live in London and don’t earn at least £50,000 a year), the way councils use this is one of the reasons why HMOs have such a bad reputation in the first place. Aside from being soul destroying for mental health at the best of times, upkeep in such properties is often low, quality of fixed appliances such as beds, cooking facilities and washing facilities less so, and as much as I hate to generalise, in the area where I’m currently living, and areas where I have previously lived, sex, drugs and booze seem to be the top of people’s priority list. Considering I’m writing this on a rather expensive MacBook, and my tech being worth more than all other aspects of my personal possessions put together, I’d likely spend every moment not in my room wondering if someone’s broken into my room, for reasons which I can assume would be obvious.

Instead of the HMO, I chose to book a stay in a Travelodge for a week or so whilst waiting for appointments for semi-supported accommodation. The ironic thing is as a single male, I had to pay for this, yet there were others (Mainly female) who didn’t have to pay, as… The council put them up there as they were deemed to by high risk in terms of their physical and mental health. Yes, gender equality works in both directions, and I can say hand on heart that I was the only paying guest for most of that week. For my American friends, a Travellodge is like a Motel 6 or Super 8; just take the worst elements of both, and you end up with a Travelodge! I hate to play the vulnerable, autistic, diabetic card, but because I’m

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a single male under a certain age, I get put to the bottom of the food pile, and that's often the case in most Local Authorities in England.

Not only is there an issue with gender disparity, you also have to consider the fact that in the UK, you have to be 'known' to have been in an area for 6 months before a Local Authority will provide any support to you. I can see the rational from one direction; if you offered to help everyone who showed up on your doorstep, there would become a degree of economic homelessness migration; people moving to areas where it's either easier to obtain work (Legally / Cash in Hand), or where the Quality of Life is better than where they were staying. The word 'known' is important here. Whilst some Local Authorities have homelessness wardens, who can identify people sleeping rough, which is then entered into databases for future reference, not every Local Authority does. This means that the 6 months mentioned above can be challenged, and often that onus would be on you as an individual to provide. Of course, with no fixed address you can't have bills in your name, and perhaps the only real way to prove this would be to collect bus passes (again, expensive), or notes from somewhere like a Job Centre, Citizen's Advice Bureau, or local charity. Even after this 6 months, the cycle of homelessness support can be like those detailed in the previous few paragraphs.

Whitewashing Homelessness.

The inspiration for me writing this article right now is just one of many on the subject both in the UK and the US. That's not to say that there's not homelessness in other countries, I'm certainly not that stupid! But the approaches to homelessness in the UK and the US seem to differ from say Canada, or the rest of Europe in that rather than recognising the problem and coming up with meaningful solutions, the leaders of both seem to prefer the approach of distorting facts, making the homeless come across as 'the problem'. It's easy to see this from a local to a national level, from MPs such as Suella Braverman (Former Home Secretary) in the UK having claimed that 'Homelessness is a lifestyle choice', to many a local council discouraging people from giving cash to homeless individuals money, claiming that it will be used solely for drugs and alcohol. Whilst there are some who *do* put drugs and booze above a warm place to sleep at night, it's worth noting that not every shelter is free. When I was living in Birmingham, I had heard that shelter places would be in the region of £10- £15 a day, especially for those who were still 'on the streets' a period of time. Long story short, the longer you remain on the streets, sometimes the harder it becomes to break the cycle of sleeping rough with the occasional stay in a shelter.

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What's also critically important to note in the UK is that you need to be 'homeless' in the same area for 6 months before a Local Authority will try and offer you any support. This is covered under the Prevention Duty which is in Section 195 of the Housing Act 1996.This places a responsibility on local housing authorities to take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness for individuals threatened with it. It however doesn't mean that a Local Authority ***has to find you accommodation***, only take steps that are reasonable, to ***support*** anyone who is, or at risk of being homeless who meet specific tests. This is potentially doable if there is a ***risk*** of homelessness, but I'd argue a lot harder once actually homeless.

This is because if you have some form of accommodation, it's assumed that you either have wi-fi, or access to internet via mobile phone (A number of mobile providers in the UK offer specially designed phone plans to those on low income / benefits). Of course you can assume there's a way of charging any electronic device so that you can then use it to say look for accommodation, remain in contact with homelessness teams, and where necessary engage with other services to help your efforts to not end up on the streets. Once actually homeless, you're reliant on libraries, charity / third sector organisations, or even chargers on busses / in pubs to keep your devices charged / connected. I once managed to make a cordial and water last me 6 hours in the joyful chain of pubs known as Wetherspoon in the UK, in order to try and find both work and accommodation, but it was a constant battle. Interestingly, as much as Wetherspoon as a pub chain suck, in large part because of their owner, they are 'safe spaces', meaning you could in theory sit in one of their establishments from 8AM – 11PM and drink the free water, and not get kicked out.

To return to some of the previous points, often the offer to stop you staying on the streets is a chair or a spot in an HMO. This obviously isn't suitable for anyone, and before the comment section is flooded with 'Beggars can't be choosers', I would argue that there needs to be some form of safeguarding test to ensure that an individuals' mental and physical health needs would be met in either circumstances. To put it bluntly, like a triage system in a hospital. Not everyone needs a bed, an IV, or admitting to a ward, ***but some do.*** There is already a banding system in place for housing need, but often, unless you can document and prove specific needs, circumstances and so on, most people will by default end up in the lowest band, meaning that there is no priority for council housing or even housing association housing, meaning that often, you'll be supported to find 'suitable' private rented accommodation, perhaps with a rent deposit / supplemental housing benefit payment to cover any difference in rent. On paper this isn't that bad, however the private

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sector can abuse this, and knowing that someone's been through the homeless system / is getting supplementary rent payments (As this is paid to a landlord direct, not to a tenant), can be more slack on their responsibilities as a landlord, and hover a Section 21 (Eviction) notice over them if they even date to think of complaining.

Of course it's in a Council's best interest to get people *somewhere* to live, even in the short to medium term. Why? It's moving people off of the streets, and hitting targets / numbers to make it look as though they are solving the homelessness problem, even though in reality they are sticking on a band aid. They also have the requirement for someone either at risk or actively homeless to engage with the process. This could mean having to try and book viewings for properties way outside of a price range, out of your immediate area, or where the quality of accommodation is to put it politely; sub-par. Failure to constantly engage means you lose support, and in terms of statistics, you become voluntarily homeless, or wording to similar effect.

There are plenty of stories in the US about people literally living in and out of their cars. This in many ways makes a lot of sense. Outside of major population areas, if you need to get from point A – B, often you need a car. Heck, I remember being stopped by a patrol car because of the fact that I walked 10 minutes from my hotel to a gas station to buy some snacks, rather than doing what many Americans would do, jump in the car for what would then be a 2 minute journey. I can only but assume that the value of a car is so important that this would be the last item they would sell in order to make ends meet, especially if an individual is either seeking or obtaining ad-hoc work. I've only ever taken a bus once in the US, and aside from my camera bag being stolen (With camera inside), it made what would have been a 20 minute journey in a taxi (This was pre-Uber dominance), become a 2 hour journey. According to my research, living in cars is classified as 'Half Homeless', and I've seen and heard stories similar to the approach in the UK where some people will sleep in their cars 5 days out of 7, saving up for a Motel 6 / Super 8 / Other cheap motel just for the purposes of showering, cleaning clothes etc. This is clearly 'safer' to some than sleeping in a tent / sleeping bag, but still carries it's own risks, and of course is not always counted in complete 'homeless' statistics.

In terms of Washington D.C, whitewashing is essentially taking a shape of its own. Giving people an incredibly small amount of time to move from their 'campsite', being offered mental health / addiction support, along with access to homeless shelters and threatening fines / jail time if they don't move on. To put this in simpler terms, Trump therefore thinks

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that:

- Everyone homeless is either a drug / alcohol addict / has mental health issues.
- Rather than solving the long term issues, sticking plasters is all that's offered (Shelters for example)
- Moving the problem away will solve the problem.

If there were to be a definition for homelessness whitewashing, this would be a very good fit. The National Guard can only operate within the confines of Washington D.C, and if you move the problem to Maryland / Virginia, it becomes another State's problem, and you can then claim that Washington D.C. has both fixed it's homelessness problem, and the parks that world leaders see when coming / going from signing documents remains 'beautiful'. Just don't go near Trump's gold course in Virginia. That will create more issues! In principle, having shelters and support in place for addiction ***can*** be useful, but these need to be more than a short term fix, but a part of a longer process of support and community integration into potentially more viable and enjoyable lives.

For Many, Even Being Homeless Requires Respecting Personal Dignity.

The common adage around homelessness is the ruining of space, or in the case of the situation in Washington D.C. ruining the beautiful, beautiful parks. Whilst there are come who choose not to value the space they are 'camping' or 'living' in (I prefer the phrase surviving), this isn't the case overall. From a personal note, when I was sleeping rough in London, I always made sure that I tidied up after myself every morning. Why? Because I was *technically* on Transport For London (TFL) land, and I knew that making even the slightest bit of a mess would have me moved away from the secluded, almost rain-protected little cubby hole. When I was sleeping rough in Milton Keynes, both before bedding down for the night and when waking up in the morning, the small group of us would do a litter sweep. It'll likely come as no surprise, but there are sub-sections of the population whom think that homeless people sleeping are dustbins, and chuck rubbish (or worse) accordingly.

What about doing your business? This often depends on where you are. Like Amazon delivery drivers, having a decently sized bottle is something that's in many people's arsenal. Not only is it more hygienic, so long as you're not exposing yourself when you do so, you can't be arrested for either public urination, or outraging public decency. Especially in 21st Century, post cottaging UK, public toilets are often a thing of the past, or in

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particular locked up overnight. In terms of having to taking a dump, it's generally accepted amongst many homeless people that you'll try and hold it in as long as possible, and wait for public facilities to open. This could be either in a train station, coffee shop, shopping mall or so on. A lot of places have moved towards the 'buy something to use our facilities' approach, however I learned that honesty and admitting your regard to public decency and dignity will be enough to either get the code to the toilet, or a gentle nod and pointing in the right direction. After all, who wants people walking past steaming mounds of excrement on the way to get their morning oat milk decaf latte? So long as you've not been banned, shopping malls and train stations are the easiest place to go and 'freshen up', as it's *slightly* easier to blend in, and you're not taking away valuable ablution time from paying customers, but the fact remains here that in many cases, people try to protect their dignity, I'd argue more than a load of 'lads' on the juice on a Friday / Saturday night.

This all ties back into the 'criminality' around the homeless. If you clean up after yourself, leave things how you found them, and respect your environment, the only real crime seems to be the eyesore you're causing to others. Yes, there are many people who beg, which depending on location can be anywhere from an annoyance to a criminal act, but over the years I've noticed that there are genuine people who see someone in a tent / sleeping bag, and are sending positive thoughts. It can be really hard for some homeless individuals to accept an offer of a cuppa or some food, as again it goes back to the question of dignity, as well as not wanting to put others out, but it is almost universally accepted with a smile and a thank you. Or to quote Pat McAfee "Be a friend, tell a friend something nice, it may change their life".

Not talking about the impact of drugs and alcohol on behaviours would be to take a completely one sided view on things. Some people have become homeless ***because*** of drug and alcohol issues, and others have fallen victim to the highs or drunkenness ***after*** spending time on the streets. I have witnessed first hand a small group of homeless individuals working as a 'team' outside a train station especially on Football days to try and take advantage of people's good will specifically to fund their habits. I specifically remember one individual who was almost surrounded by bottles of water (it was a hot day, and having a bottle of water on one's person is almost engrained in British physique). Yet after the last of the passengers left the train, they and the rest of their team all scuttled off, in search of their next hit. This is one of the reasons why some people are either suspicious about giving out money to individuals, or why Local Authorities get involved by encouraging other ways of donating, for example to support local shelter

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efforts. Having seen the impact of drugs and alcohol on the homeless population, it makes some sense, however there is always the risk of someone entering withdrawal symptoms if trying to/ being forced to go cold turkey, which can be fatal if being left alone during the process. This is why associated programs alongside shelters is so important, and why Trump offering such support when talking about those beautiful parks is actually not wrong, just delivered an incredibly black and white way.

The final point to raise here is that there are many who are suspicious of public bodies, either through their own made up opinions, or real life circumstances. As I mentioned above about the role of homelessness services at Local Authority level, there are a number of ways to spin things in such a way to 'discharge' a Section 195 obligation, and this can be as blasé as not showing evidence of booking and attending viewings for properties, or not accepting any 'reasonable' property options offered / suggested. Whilst in UK law there is a provision to make it illegal to refuse someone accommodation just because they are on benefits (DSS is often used in short form), there are a number of easy ways around this, but conducting affordability checks ***before*** offering a viewing. This way, a landlord / agent can simply say that they are of the opinion that the tenant would be unable to afford rent, bills etc, and is a loophole I've seen used a lot with estate agents as of late. Even where rent deposit schemes / discretionary housing payments exist *in theory*, there is the risk of either funds drying up, or come the end of the 12 month period of receiving a discretionary housing payment, being back at step 1, because most Local Authorities only offer this for a 12 month period. There's also the issue of priority bills such as Council Tax and utility bills, which can snowball quickly if say the individual is not on Universal Credit / Personal Independence Payments etc. Heck, you often can't claim housing benefit without being on universal credit, which could be a system individuals are unaware of how to navigate, and may not even have the correct documentation for. All this can snowball other issues, disengaging the individual, and impacting further on physical and mental health.

Final Thoughts.

To cover this topic fully would require an entire book. What's been written above is simply scratching the surface, and I'll be honest, I know little about the homeless system in the US compared to the UK, where I've previous lived experiences. What seems to be true in both the UK and USA however is whilst homelessness is a horrible thing, in many cases the solution is whitewashing and hiding the problem, rather than coming up with long term solutions to a problem which can't be solved with short term thinking.

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If President Trump, Boris Johnson, Kier Starmer or Andy Street want to ‘fix’ the problem, then serious time, money and effort needs to be put in place to not just look at the root causes of homelessness, but find an approach that protects the most vulnerable in society to not just provide them with a bed in an HMO, but allow them to grow and prosper in their immediate community. Homelessness isn’t what many people perceive it to be, and whilst there are some in society who can ponder wether or not to open up a second bottle of wine, there are others wondering if they have enough money to buy something to eat, or try and save up for a night in a shelter.

In the UK there are a number of charities designed to support those either homeless or at risk of homelessness. I must admit that my experiences of Shelter, in three different situations over the course of 18 years has been abysmal, though I’m certain they provide good work to some. Their lobbying arm is also useful and important in keeping the horrors of homelessness in the public eye. I however would place the Big Issue at the top of my list, by providing the opportunity for individuals to earn money through means other than begging. The concept is you buy copies of the magazine for half the cover price, and then keep the other half as profit, which these days is £2 an issue with a cover price of £4. The only advice I’d give to people selling the Big Issue is to flip through each edition yourself; You can make much more of an impactful sales pitch by saying something like:

> This week’s Big Issue! Interview with Daniel Mays from the hit show Thursday Murder Club, and why Gen Z may be no more! Come purchase your copy now!

Compared to what I often here which is just:

> Big Issue. Big Issue. Anyone for the Big Issue.

Maybe I’ve been to too many markets in my life, but being able to stand out in a crowd is important, especially if you’ve invested money in something to sell.

There are a number of initiatives taken in other countries to make life less hard for those living on the streets. My favourite is in pan-European countries who use the pfand deposit scheme for cans and bottles. It’s become a social norm in many central locations for people to leave their empty drinking containers next to bins (Or at the very least on top), so that those more needy can collect them and return them as necessary. As most pfand deposit

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schemes produce vouchers rather than hard cash, it means that the money can't really be used for buying drugs (unless someone takes a financial hit by black market voucher conversion to cash), and means that individuals who are homeless can at least get some food, water, nourishment and sanitary products.

This is definitely a topic I'll be returning to, so your thoughts, comments and examples are most welcome. Most likely this will factor into Series 2 of Breaking Down, Breaking Down (Yes, I've not forgotten about it!), and if you have personal experiences, I'd love to hear about them. Either comment below or contact me directly.

Peace, Rage And Love xx

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