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Finding Burke Among the Street Sleepers

A Guided Tour of London's Homeless Scene

By: John Wilson

On Thursday, July 20, I had a rare opportunity to see the workings of Britain's welfare state from the very bottom as I visited four popular venues for the homeless population of central London. This article is not a policy argument, as 12 hours of observations and anecdotes did not make me an expert on homelessness. It is simply an account of what I saw and what I heard with a few brief reflections on what it all means.

One of the most interesting things about the tour is my guide. Michael is in his late 50s and has been homeless for five years. We met in early June, soon after I arrived in London. The church I am staying at for the summer gives out sandwiches and coffee every Saturday to local homeless, and Michael is one of the regulars.

Michael is clean and eloquent. He is also very outspoken about what he thinks is wrong with the way London deals with homelessness. There is a great ignorance, he says, of who homeless people are, leading to "solutions" to homelessness that are both utopian and cosmetic. He keeps up with all the proceedings of the Westminster (Central London) City Council regarding the homeless population, and the Council consults him from time to time to get an insider's view of the situation. I meet Michael in Trafalgar Square at 8:15 a.m. His plan is to take me through a modified version of his daily routine. We will make four stops, all in places where he has talked to the management to clear my visit. Many people hide among the homeless, he explains, so they are wary of newcomers. He also warns me against taking photos. Over the next 12 hours, we will walk more than ten miles around the city to the places where Michael eats, showers, and checks his email. "Being homeless is a full-time job," he says.

He tells me that it is practically impossible to go hungry in London, even for homeless people without the desire or ability to walk as much as he does, as there are hundreds of venues around the city that offer free meals. Street beggars may be the public face of homelessness, but many of

them are not homeless at all. Most homeless, he insists, mind their own business and blend in with the regular population during the day.

Michael is a rarity among street homeless in that he does not attempt to collect public funds. Unemployment benefits in the United Kingdom are around £56 (\$105) per week, and while in theory the recipient must be actively looking for work, in practice he can easily dupe the system. In Britain, furthermore, eligibility for benefits never expires, so it is possible to live on the dole for most of one's life.

Michael, however, makes no pretense about looking for work and prefers to keep his integrity. With no rent to pay, free meals, and Britain's national healthcare, he can cover his incidental expenses with the few pounds per day of loose change he finds on the ground of a nearby park.

Our first stop is across the river in Lambeth for breakfast at an establishment run by the London City Mission, an evangelical group. It has seats for 120 people and a few showers. The staff is friendly and the atmosphere is peaceful—largely, Michael says, because they do not tolerate any disturbances.

This is a "community" breakfast, he explains, which means both homeless and non-homeless are welcome. Most of the non-homeless here were once on the street but have since found placement in locally subsidized "Council flats."

This gets Michael talking about one of the "utopian ideologies" he often encounters, which holds that the way to solve homelessness is simply to give everyone homes. The plan is to get as many street homeless as possible into long-term hostels until a Council flat opens up. The accommodation generally costs about one-third of one's unemployment benefits and is deducted directly from the handout. Many people are certainly grateful for a bed, but ultimately, he says, putting homeless in Council flats simply pushes the problem out of the way.

"You take someone from the street, put him in a flat, and just expect him to become a model citizen. Meanwhile, you have isolated him from the only community he knows, and he starts to get lonely. He's back out on the street within months."

Often, Michael explains, people will continue to sleep on the street while using their flat to store their belongings or subletting it to finance a drug habit. Others have their keys stolen or simply neglect to sign their renewal paperwork. Sitting at lunch one Saturday a few weeks before our tour, Michael could point to various people and tell me how many times they have been through "the system."

Our next stop is lunch at the Manna Centre, a Catholic-affiliated institution a mile to the east. The Manna Centre is a bit larger than the London City Mission, employing nine full-time staff and serving hot meals daily from a full kitchen. A group of homeless men are drinking near the entrance as we walk in, but the staff makes sure that no alcohol enters the building. This is another no-nonsense venue.

Michael takes a shower while I talk to the Centre's director, an Irishman named Paddy Boyle. A full 85 percent of the Manna Centre's operating budget comes from private sources, I learn. The remainder comes from the Southwark City Council and covers the salary of two welfare workers who advise the homeless about housing and benefits.

The Manna Centre is proud of its independence, Paddy says, especially as more and more homeless drop-in centers, following New Labour money, have shifted from simply feeding the homeless to actively trying to rehabilitate them.

Paddy has no problem with rehabilitation, and he says that the Manna Centre is ready to help anyone who comes to them looking for help. Nevertheless, he insists that there needs to be a place for what he calls a "simple Christian" ethos: feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

We talk briefly about the difference between the American and European social models. Paddy prefers the safety net of the European welfare state, but he is honest about the failures of the system. It is not unusual, he says, for parents to bring their children in to claim benefits as soon as they are eligible, fully expecting that they could spend their entire lives on the dole.

Michael clearly appreciates the Manna Centre's live-and-let-live outlook, and he resents the implication that he needs to be "rehabilitated." He considers the rehabilitation efforts at most government-funded centers to be just another part of the system through which the homeless are herded, and he worries that the process can undermine their dignity.

"The conventional assumption is that the homeless are a bunch of miserable wretches who need serious help," he says. "But most of us have adjusted to the lifestyle. It's what we know."

He tells me about the teams of welfare workers that go around by night trying to convince street sleepers to add their names to a list to get a bed in a hostel. He says that they have harassed him several times, and most of his friends do not like them.

Many long-term homeless have no desire to live in hostels, which provide living accommodation, counseling and benefits advice to homeless people waiting for a permanent place to live. The wait to get a Council flat can be over two years, and frequent drug abuse in the hostels can make life miserable.

With a few hours of free time before our next stop we take in some sights along the river. Michael says that the middle of the day can get boring, and he is glad for the company.

Michael strikes me as a paradoxical figure. He is the most active and aware homeless person I have ever met, but he insists that he is just trying to live his life in peace. He has spent most of his life in normal society, yet when I ask him if he would take a job and a settled life if he had the chance, he says he does not want the hassle.

He is also a serious Christian, and he credits his faith with getting him through a messy divorce ten years ago. "I've fought my battles; I'm at peace," he says. His sense of peace, I guess, is still compatible with a real compassion for the people around him.

We are back in Trafalgar Square at 5 p.m. to visit the London Connection at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. This is not one of Michael's usual stops, but he wants me to see some contrast.

The London Connection is one of Westminster's official, Council-financed homeless centers. It offers a laundry service, a National Health clinic, employment advice, internet access, entertainment, art classes, group discussions, field trips, and 25 temporary beds for people it deems especially desperate.

These services come at the price of a layer of bureaucracy. All clients have to register before they enter. Non-homeless are turned away, and homeless who are not from Westminster are told to contact the relevant authority for their district. The staff is sympathetic and well intentioned, but there is a tone of weary condescension in some of their voices.

The director of the youth program gives me a tour of the building. She shows me the art room and sadly reflects on how talented some of the homeless are. When we get to the career advice room, I ask her how much success the London Connection has had in getting people off the street and into stable employment. "It's a long process," she says. I take that to mean "not much."

We do not eat at the London Connection, which charges for food. Dinner is still a long walk away at an Anglican church called St. James the Less, one of Michael's favorite places to eat. Volunteers run the entire service, so it only opens once every fortnight.

There is a line of about 50 people outside the door as it opens. We are welcomed, seated, and served restaurant-style as volunteers bring food and drinks right to our table.

It is a wonderful meal, and everyone seems genuinely grateful. Michael says that the homeless especially appreciate venues like St. James because the volunteers take the time to eat and chat with them. He considers it a sign of respect.

After dinner, we walk toward Michael's sleeping ground. He has had a sheltered place to sleep for the past few years, and he makes me promise not to reveal where it is. He knows the local security guard, who lets him stay as long as he cleans up and leaves by 7 a.m.

As we walk, I start thinking. I have been seeing homelessness through the eyes of a man who has his life sorted out and who has a strong sense of what is wrong with the system. But what about the street homeless who truly are "miserable wretches," who have some mental health problem and do not know what to do besides beg and drink? How would they see a place like the London Connection or the welfare workers who try to get them into hostels?

I share my thoughts with Michael. He reminds me that he has no big solution to homelessness; he just wants to get people who might find one to see the situation from the street level. As for rehabilitation, he says that while it does happen, it is very rare.

"You can try to convince someone to give up the bottle, but what is he going to give it up for?" he asks. "A menial, low-paying job? A lonely, isolated life in a Council flat? That's not much of

an incentive."

London is a lonely place when you look at it from the bottom. It is hard to put down roots, and the drugs, the mental illness, and the hardness of the life separate people even further from each other. St. James, I think, was so wonderful in contrast precisely because it showed a faint glimmer of real community.

Day-to-day street life is not completely void of community, however. Michael is close to a long-established charity called the Simon Community, in which volunteers and homeless people live and work together, serving other homeless in the surrounding area. Organizations like Simon are in a good position to give real help to homeless who are ready for it. The kind of community they create could also provide that incentive Michael was talking about-something tangible for which to leave street life. In a way, they are recreating on the streets of London what Edmund Burke called the "little platoons" of society-small communities held together by the natural bonds of family, proximity, and tradition.

It seems that the politicians are starting to take notice. David Cameron, the youthful new leader of Britain's Conservative Party, is advocating a brand of compassionate conservatism several times more cheerful and sunny than President Bush's. Both Cameron and Prime Minister Tony Blair are heaping praise on private charities and looking for ways to encourage and even fund them. There is talk of turning the "little platoons" into grand "armies of compassion."

They should keep in mind, however, that the sense of community that charities like Simon offer is only replacing what is not there in the first place. People talk about stopping homelessness before it starts through increased drug education or advanced mental illness screening. But where is the love, the respect, or the neighborly hand to help people up when they are first falling?

That is not something that a government program can provide, but it has everything to do with the health of a society. It gets me wondering how generations of the welfare state, of son after father spending a lifetime on the dole, have affected Britain's little platoons. Does a community start to break down when individuals' need for each other becomes less apparent?

I do not know. The homeless of London are a crosssection of British society, which means that the various problems of British society show up here in particularly vicious form. Perhaps, then, the only real "solution" to homelessness is a healthy, hardworking, and compassionate body politic. Good luck, Britain.