

Excluding Boys From Society

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Is fining boys £5 a week when they impregnate a teenage girl going to become this country's most effective new contraceptive or not? Setting the Child Support Agency on older males has already proved somewhat of a mixed blessing. Now the Government's ambiguously titled Social Exclusion Unit is proposing to make juvenile males pay for their sexual pleasures through the same punitive mechanism. I personally don't envy any civil servant the task of trying to attach the mythical earnings of unemployed Darren from Chelmsford who accompanies his refusal to give a blood test with an aggressive "fuck off and die" but that's a technical problem. Does it work for the average young male psyche?

The trouble with deploying sticks as opposed to carrots is that you glamourise sin. When dealing with boys who literally do not work at any level except sexually you risk disaster by giving them additional negative attention. I foresee a hopeless Darren boasting quite logically that not only has he got his girlfriend pregnant but the government has put a flattering price on his head, or perhaps it's his cock. Boys in deprivation join gangs to get a measurement of self-worth. Boys who have no other yard-stick by which to measure themselves will delightedly embrace the new culture of uncollectable, poll tax-style sexual fines. And while we're talking about joy-riding, the further suggestion that Darren's driving licence will be cancelled if he spawns an unwanted child seems to me to run into the brick wall of existing motoring lawlessness. How many young offenders driving without tax, insurance or the permission of the car owner will lose any sleep?

I believe the government's approach, which is better intentioned than Tory efforts from John Patten and Baroness Blatch, still fails to recognise three outstanding facts about male sexuality. First, there is a grinding correlation between male social inadequacy, poverty and sexual fecklessness. Second, male identity at all levels of the food chain overdepends on the slippery slope of what men see as sexual success. (Upmarket men like the late Sir James Goldsmith boast of filling a mistress vacancy while downmarket lads tell me: "Well it's not like I fancied her much but I hadn't had sex lately and I need to keep my love life up to scratch") Third, our nation's new moral frenzy is still failing to promote the one message which might hit home where it hurts - that having offspring you cannot care for is not cruelty to marriage it is cruelty to children.

All this boils down to re-striking the balance between politics and culture. If you want boys to behave responsibly in bed then you'd better make sure they don't belong to an underclass for whom the word has no further application. It would be instructive to see what sort of success the exclusion Initiative would have if Gordon and Tony devoted the same level of resources to finding jobs for the boys as they have to Kosovan peacekeeping. Poor classes, like poor nations, tend to have a population problem. It is futile to pretend that sex education alone can ever bridge that gap.

But it is equally false to pretend that this nation has ever been serious about providing sex education. The point is we still don't really tell teenagers the truth. Many of the explicit letters I've received as a problem page writer were NOT published in magazine columns because the editors couldn't face them. The British still think it's funny to call a

situation comedy "Bottom", we get our knickers in a twist when women's towels with wings are advertised on tv and regard toe-sucking as a perversion not...foreplay.

John Craven and I were once asked by Children's BBCTV to make a film about HIV and AIDS but were never allowed to mention the virus's principal mode of transmission - SEX. We told young viewers you couldn't get AIDS from mosquitoes, from fishing in reservoirs, from breathing other people's germs. What we SHOULD have said was that you couldn't get accurate information about AIDS from watching tv. The BBC showed the film twice.

By providing little straightforward, snigger-free information for youngsters we create the very problems we deplore. Parents who don't explain where babies come from, or shelter their children from news' programmes on deviance and abuse, or withdraw them from school lessons on HIV and AIDS, or imagine that the News of the World is some sort of child guidance primer, render them more vulnerable to danger. An ignorant child is obviously an unprotected child.

If this government is serious and I for one broadly welcome what they are attempting, the scope and content of sex education for boys has got to include a positive image of paternity. This means getting male role models into schools where at the moment only female teachers are found. (One set of boys lucky enough to receive personal sex education from a man spent most of the lesson finding out how to shave. This was something their mothers could not teach them, legs being different from chins!) It means tv shows which are guaranteed to upset the gentility of the nation by discussing subjects like menstruation and masturbation in the sort of prime time slot currently enjoyed by the Antiques' Roadshow. It means promoting the novel idea that men are more than the spasm of ejaculation. And it means encouraging boys to feel as sympathetic to the plight of deprived babies as they already seem towards political refugees and hunted animals. It means an in-your-face approach for the first time ever - and it will cost, a lot.