

excerpt from FACING HARD CHOICES ABOUT THE POOR

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Society needs to engage responsibly with the problems of Karen Matthews, argues **Jill Segger**



Scapegoat: Karen Matthews, with Craig Meehan (*left*), her then partner PA

IT IS beyond dispute that Karen Matthews was an inadequate mother with a chaotic lifestyle. Well-adjusted parents do not drug and abduct their own children in order to earn a reward. But the vehement reaction that followed Ms Matthews's trial reflects well on no one.

From the hyperbole of Chief Superintendent Andy Brennan, who described her as “pure evil”, to the poverty-porn prurience displayed by much of the media as they salivated over the details of her maternal incompetence, middle-England had its moment to air knee-jerk responses to benefit dependency, single motherhood, and “underclass” fecklessness. In this season, when we remember that the divine once chose to take an address with the poor and the despised, we would do well to acknowledge the challenge this presents to us in our own time.

Liberty and equality are easier causes than fraternity. Poverty is not pretty, and the demeanour of the deprived is frequently unpleasing. Karen Matthews is 33 and looks 53. The black-ringed eyes and pasty complexion tell of poor diet and lifestyle.

Here was a woman of limited intelligence, with few resources of articulacy or dignity on which to draw in her moment of public exposure. It is honest to say that it was ugly; it is dishonest and cruel to create a pariah by exploiting that ugliness. We should examine the individual and collective failings that have combined to form the world that has been exposed by this distressing case.

The cure for poverty is money. And the route to money is good education and secure employment. In every British town there are men and women who, like Karen Matthews, left school at 16 with minimal qualifications. Many grew up in workless families, where education was not valued; no example of the disciplines of learning or of the responsibilities of employment were set before them, and, most damagingly, there was no sense of aspiration.

In environments without hope, only individuals possessing extraordinary powers of will and intellect escape the dead hand of welfare dependency. An industrious and responsible manner of life has to be learned, and those without experience will struggle to be good teachers of their children.

It is the responsibility of the state to rectify structures that contribute to this destructive inheritance. Although some progress has been made under this Government, there is still a long way to go in improving schools and giving parity of esteem and resource to vocational training.

Children whose abilities do not fit the academic mould soon learn to see themselves as failures, and their adult lives are deformed by that early experience of worthlessness. Where there is neither expectation nor respect on the part of society, it is hardly surprising if an individual chooses apathy and disengagement over effort and social responsibility.

THE benefit system is the subject of much debate. Opinion no longer divides along traditional left-right lines, as awareness grows of the harm done to our social fabric by the long-standing failure to couple rights with responsibilities. There are many on the Left who no longer see it as oppressive to expect able-bodied recipients of welfare to do some community service.

Karen Matthews had never been in employment. There are thousands like her who have not experienced the relationship between work and reward, or been required to consider the reciprocal nature of the relationship between society and the citizen. This is where the slide to the underclass begins, and it is difficult to disagree with the Work and Pensions Secretary, James Purnell, when he says that leaving people on benefits is “a cruel thing to do because it’s bad for them and their families”.

The liberal conscience is reticent about condemning lifestyles outside the norm. There is humility and charity in this, but there is also the danger that destructive choices may be validated by the fear of appearing censorious. Karen Matthews has seven children by five different men. No amount of reluctance to judge should blind us to the fact that this cannot be the basis of secure family life.

A real dilemma is presented by this level of irresponsible fecundity. Children born of transient relationships between damaged people cannot be left to suffer for the failings of their parents. But it is neither judgemental nor self-righteous to acknowledge that society may make it too easy for the victims of deprivation to perpetuate dysfunction in this way.

Most families living in poverty strive hard to protect their children from its worst effects. But, where it proves necessary, benefits could be made conditional on attendance at classes in parenting, budgeting, and nutrition. Where there is a demonstrable inability to manage money, some portion of the benefit might be given in the form of vouchers for essentials. Karen Matthews’s babies defecated in plastic bags because their mother spent money on cigarettes and sweets rather than on nappies.

There will be cries of “nanny state”, but if we do not intervene to rescue lives crumbling into chaos, we permit dysfunction, abuse, and misery to cascade down the generations. The present and future well-being of children — and, by extension, of society — demands that we debate these hard choices.

We must refuse to be seduced into seeing Karen Matthews as a monstrous “other” on to whom we can decant our anger, before retreating into sterile disgust. We have scapegoated this piteous example of social failure, and congratulated ourselves on being distanced from such dysfunction.

It is a dangerous distance, facilitating denial of both our common humanity and our common citizenship. A neighbour on the much-maligned Dewsbury Moor estate did not fall into that trap. Promising to visit Ms Matthews in prison, she said: “I’d like to give her a good slapping. But then I’d give her a cuddle.”