

George Monbiot

Absent Minded

19th August 2022

To this government, the duty of care is an abomination.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 10th August 2022

Has Boris Johnson ended his holiday? It's hard to tell. He was never committed to government, even during national emergencies, as his serial [absence from Cobra meetings](#) at the beginning of the pandemic revealed. Now, while several national crises converge, he seems to have given up altogether. But his detachment is not just a pathology. It is also a doctrine. Absence is what the party donors paid for.

Whether physically present or not, recent prime ministers and their governments have prepared us for none of the great predicaments we face. They have looked the other way as the water companies failed to [commission any new reservoirs](#) since they were privatised in 1989, and allowed astonishing volumes of that precious commodity we call treated drinking water – [2.4bn litres a day](#) on current estimates – to leak away. It's a carelessness so grand that it feels like a metaphor. Instead of forcing them to stop these leaks, the government has allowed these corporations to [pump the rivers dry](#): the living world, as ever, is the buffer that must absorb failure and greed.

So determined is the government to absent itself from decision-making that it cannot even institute a hosepipe ban: it must feebly [ask the water companies](#) to do so. Most, with an interest in ensuring their metered customers use as much as possible, have [so far refused](#). Nor have the companies been obliged to upgrade their sewage treatment works. The combination of over-abstraction and sewage dumping is devastating. The water in the [upper reaches](#) of some of our chalk streams – [remarkable ecosystems](#) that are almost unique to England – now consists of nothing but [sewage outflows](#) and road run-off. During this long period of regulatory absence, the privatised water firms have piped [£72bn in dividends](#) into the accounts of their shareholders.

Similarly, [David Cameron decommissioned](#) the government's home energy efficiency

programme in the name of “cutting the green crap”. The number of lofts being insulated each year in the UK [fell from 1.6m to 126,000](#) from one year to the next. By 2021, the number had declined to 32,000. Boris Johnson claimed he would reverse this trend, but his [green homes grant](#) was a total fiasco: so badly designed that it was bound to fail. Partly as a result, an astonishing proportion of the population – [more than half](#) on one estimate – could be pushed into fuel poverty this winter. Now Liz Truss, the leading Tory leadership contender, has pledged to [scrap the green levies](#) funding energy efficiency and renewable electricity.

In Italy, by contrast, the government [pays people 110%](#) of the costs of all the home energy improvements they make. Germany has [allocated €56.3bn](#) (£47.6bn) for renovating buildings. Finland has supplied [one-third of its homes](#) with heat pumps. We face a choice not only between fossil fuel profits or a habitable planet, but also between fossil fuel profits and habitable homes. Johnson, Truss and Rishi Sunak have chosen their side.

Energy bills, coupled with punitive rents, rising inflation and stagnant wages and benefits could mean actual destitution for millions, without effective action. But neither [the government](#) nor the two leadership contenders offer meaningful help. Nor have they anything to say about the meltdown that awaits the NHS this winter if, as seems likely, another Covid-19 surge coincides with the underfunding crisis. The only public services not facing a major shortfall are defence (whose budget Truss [intends greatly to raise](#)) and roads. There’s a reason why the government spends so much on roads while strangling the rest of the public sector: they are among the few public services used by the very rich.

It’s not just that this shell of a government, and those who seek to take it over, have no answers. It’s that their ideology forbids answers. To them, the duty of care is an abomination. Ten years ago next month, Liz Truss launched [Britannia Unchained](#), a semi-literate polemic that switched the blame for everything going wrong in the UK to “a diminished work ethic and a culture of excuses”. Of her four co-authors, three – Priti Patel, Kwasi Kwarteng and Dominic Raab – are frontbenchers in the current government (the fourth, Chris Skidmore MP, appears to have experienced a damascene conversion, and now [campaigns to stop climate breakdown](#)).

They blamed inequality and the lack of social mobility in this country not on the patrimonial spiral of [wealth accumulation](#) and the resultant [rentier economy](#), but on “laziness”. Citing no meaningful evidence, they maintained that “once they enter the workplace, the British are among the worst idlers in the world”.

They celebrated what they called the “black-market buccaneers” who in other countries have created “a lawless place” where demand can be instantly met by supply. This, Truss and her co-authors insisted, is “the purest level of entrepreneurialism, untouched by law, regulation or tax”. Their glorification of lawlessness abutted their section on freeports, whose [development](#) in this country both Truss and Sunak support. Freeports are low-democracy zones in which a near-absence of regulation [attracts money-laundering](#) by terrorists and organised crime, tax evasion, corruption, smuggling, counterfeiting and [drug trafficking](#). In other words, they come pretty close to the “lawless places” Truss and the others admire.

They have now had ample opportunity, through their years in government, to test this doctrine of absence. The result is looming stagflation and an anticipated recession likely to be deeper than any faced by a comparable economy. It turns out that inequality and the loss of social mobility are not, as they claimed, the result of British people’s “mindset, perception and culture”, but of policy failure. Who knew? Unchastened by experience, both Truss and Sunak intend only to absent themselves further from effective governance. Everything that goes wrong in a nation first goes wrong in the heads of those who dominate it.

When governments are contractually incapable of solving their people’s problems, only one option remains: turning us against each other. This process is well under way: the purpose of culture wars is to distract us from inequality. But it will go much further. Truss and Sunak compete to promise [ever greater retribution](#) towards those seeking sanctuary from murderous regimes. Last week, Truss promised to [legislate against](#) “militant” trade unionists and environmental protesters, as if Johnson’s [new laws](#) were insufficiently draconian.

The more corrupt and less representative government becomes, the longer must be its list of enemies, and the more extreme the rhetoric with which it denounces them. As our crises escalate, as the government absents itself from public service, violence bubbles ever closer to the surface. This is how a country falls apart.

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