

Introduction

My, how quickly a near decade goes by: when all of this was happening I was merely middle aged and still looking forward to the coming crisis. The all this being the irruption of the web into the formerly staid newspaper business in Britain. There were three different things that led to something of a sea change in how we all viewed the opinion columns in said newspapers.

The first was that the newspapers themselves were now all online, with comments sections below the pieces themselves. The Great Unwashed were therefore able to tell the opinionators, opinion formers, what they thought of the logic, factual accuracy and simple believability of those opinions that were being offered. It was something of a shock to those panjandrums of the media world that we didn't in fact sip their distilled wisdom with glee. Rather, we thought that many of them were tendentious bores without the ability to construct a logical argument nor even accurately quote their own source material. Before those comment sections the feedback had been restricted to the few who could be bothered to buy a stamp and send in a snail mail to the editor. And of course the high and mightys actually producing the copy were protected from the wilder (or, as we might put it, „more interesting“) of those. Perhaps the odd one that really was in green ink would be passed along for amusement's sake.

Comment sections meant that disagreement, the detailing of error, ridicule, even insult, were available immediately at no cost to anyone reading the paper online. And my how did the populace flock to all of those. This really was a shock to those used to composing detailed instructions for how society should be run: to find that the demos not only didn't agree but held them, largely, in contempt.

The second was the rise of blogs. We Brits were a little behind the US in this, we didn't really get going until 2004. By 2006 we had a rich and diverse environment, even a certain level of iteration as some blogs would detail the idiocies to be found in those newspaper comment sections. That „blogosphere“, to use Glenn Reynolds' neologism, also allowed more detailed examination of what the opinion columns were saying.

The third was that by this time, 2006, almost all of the source information that those would be newspaper opinion formers were using to make their arguments was online. It wasn't all that long ago that if the Office of National Statistics released a report then the only place you could get it was direct from ONS or in certain specialised libraries. So, if The Guardian said that ONS has reported that the Tories are going to cull the firstborn we didn't really know whether this was true or not. And of course people did tend to, despite the repeated admonitions not to, believe what they read in the newspapers. Thus columnists making such assertions had got something of a free ride. And now (or then perhaps) they didn't.

Claiming that a Tory had come over all Herod would lead to that XKCD cartoon being played out, „Citation Needed“. In the comments section under the claim, in blogs around and about the place and it was possible to go and find whatever it was that Sir Bufton Tufton had actually said and correct and admonish the columnist.

Which leads us to the subject of this book. Polly Toynbee has long been the *grande dame* (no, the *grande horizontale* was someone else) of left wing opinion journalism. To the point that even David Cameron quoted

her when he was in opposition (a little after the period this book covers). And to the point that reputedly her editor, Alan Rusbridger at The Guardian, was terrified of her.

And then came along those three changes. As a result of those three I for one had great fun essentially parping at her and making similar *fnarr fnarr* sorts of comments, both on my blog and underneath her columns. To the point that in one of her columns she actually demanded to know who I was (referenced below). And made the unfortunate typo of asking „Tim Worstall, you pendant, who are you?“. An interesting corollary of Muphry's Law there, that if there is to be a typo it's going to be in the most embarrassing place possible. Given the lack of seriousness with which I approached this whole business I adopted pendant as a talisman and it's still one of the running jokes that catches new arrivals to my blog. It is possible that it was not in fact a typo, Polly meaning to describe me as something valuable, a precious jewel that one keeps near the heart. Or something close to a tit of course.

Then in May 2006 along came Factchecking Pollyanna. Actually doing the hard work of checking Polly's writing, checking her sources, and highlighting where there might be a certain divergence between them. And that's what this slim e-volume is at heart, bringing that blog to a wider audience. Along with, where I had commented upon the same column, my own parping and *fnaar fnaars*.

I must emphasise that I do not know who Factchecking Pollyanna is or was. I've always had a sneaking hope that it was actually Alan Rusbridger himself but I've never seen any evidence that his research skills are up to this sort of level. Nor his commitment to accuracy. Polly at least at one point thought it was me as she asked me to také the blog down but as everyone can see from what follows my skills aren't up to the sort of forensic examination („forensic examination“ here perhaps to be best understood as something a little more invasive than Cartman and his alien anal probes) that Factchecking subjects Polly to. All I know is that Factchecking was someone who would not fare well if it was found out that they were indeed ridiculing Polly by taking what she said seriously and going and checking it.

This near decade later Polly is still the *grande dame* of left wing opinion journalism. Still has The Guardian in fear of her, still garbles the reports that cross her desk which she then uses as the underpinning of her instructions as to what us peasantry really ought to shut up and get on with doing. Because, you know, she has told us to. My parps and *fnaars* haven't changed attitudes to her very much, if at all. Factchecking though has left us with a wonderful record of quite how factually challenged much of what Polly asserts turns out to be. Something that is still true of the more modern columns for anyone paying attention at home.

This release could be taken as a clarion call (as PJ O'R once asked, is a clarion a large clarinet?) to something or other but the intention is much more modest than that. Given that Polly did once ask me to také the Factchecking Pollyanna site down we therefore know that the site annoyed her. And so a re-release in a different format (it is all still available online) could be likely to annoy her. And that's good enough for me: annoying Polly Toynbee is a reasonable enough motivation for pretty much anything, isn't it?

The format is simple enough. We start with the last Factchecking Pollyanna piece, then move to the more normal chronological, time arrows forward, layout. Where I have commented on the same piece as Factchecking then my minor contribution is marked „Worstall“ at the head. Everything not so marked is thus from Factchecking.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2006

My top ten favourite Toynbee errors

Between May and December 2006, this blog detailed the factual errors in Polly Toynbee's columns. I have now stopped doing this, but here are my favourite Toynbee errors for that period:

10. Polly implies that 142% of people are dissatisfied with Tony Blair [insert own joke].
9. Polly asks of "Cameron's set" the following question: "Do they know the median (middle England) salary is just £21,000?" when it wasn't.
8. Polly copies a sentence from an IPPR report, pausing only to strike all references to the sources, which would have revealed the factual inaccuracies in the sentence.
7. Complaining that more prisoners reoffend when she actually meant were reconvicted, while in the same column she praises two trends which would lead to higher reconvictions even if reoffending had remained flat – improved detection and fewer abandoned trials.
6. Polly is £100bn out in her approximation of state spending.
5. Polly actually cites a source for her assertion that "Arnold Schwarzenegger drives his own Humvee in San Francisco". Sadly, the source she cites makes it clear that it is not his.
4. Toynbee's colleague, Mike White, disbelieves her "facts".
3. Polly says that emissions have gone up by 3%, when they had gone down by 3%.
2. In a column criticising Stephen Byers for using "mendacious figures", she says "[t]his week City dealers' bonuses soared higher than ever, to £21bn". She later backtracks, and puts the total for all City bonuses (not just dealers) at £9bn, with no acknowledgement that her earlier number was mendacious.
1. Polly writes a 21-word sentence with five factual errors in it.

FRIDAY, MAY 05, 2006

Copying from the Telegraph

Polly Toynbee's column today is relatively fact-free (well, they always are, but at least this time there aren't a lot of non-facts masquerading as facts). However, she does say:

Indeed, recent research on child care found that children left with grandparents all day did worse than children in good nurseries.

As ever with Pollyanna, there is no source, but at a guess she is referring to an article called "The Effects of a Mother's Return to Work Decision on Child Development in the UK" by Paul Gregg, Elizabeth Washbrook,

Carol Propper and Simon Burgess, published in the *Economic Journal* of February 2005 (pdf of the article is available here at the time of writing). The article does not distinguish between care provided by "grandparents" and "good nurseries" -- it distinguishes among: informal unpaid care by a relative; non-relative paid care; and centre-based care. The research finds that relying on unpaid care by a relative (as opposed to paid care) is detrimental to children where the mother returns to work when her child is 18 months old or younger, though only, bizarrely, in better off households. Why? Difficult to say. Quote from the article:

We conclude that the use of predominantly relative care is damaging only for children in the more advantaged households and that children in less advantaged households are not harmed by early full time maternal employment. However, we are unable to say much about the reason underlying this result.

This is so far from Toynbee's inaccurate *précis* that you would certainly be entitled to ask why I think that this is the research to which she is alluding. Fair question. It rather seems as if the mangling starts, strangely enough, in the *Telegraph*. In this column, their social affairs correspondent Sarah Womack summarises the research thus:

Mothers who return to work part-time when their children are as young as three months old have no adverse effect on the future development of their offspring, according to the latest academic survey.

But full-time working mothers who leave their children under 18 months old in the sole care of grandparents or of friends risk seeing their children fall behind at school.

Researchers say there are "significant" detrimental effects when the child is left with an unpaid carer.

The child is, on average, three months behind his or her peers by the age of seven, doing less well in literacy and numeracy tests and being less adept with language.

If the child goes to a nursery rather than grandma's while his or her mother works full-time, he or she is about one month to two months behind by the age of seven.

Note that it starts as an accurate synopsis -- the second paragraph is not bad (though "of grandparents or of friends" is not the same as "relatives" -- the authors of the article talk about, for example, partners providing care). However, by the final paragraph of the quote Womack is trying to give examples and straying dangerously from the research she is trying to summarise. However, she is not straying as badly as Toynbee's sloppy, inaccurate one-sentence summary.

TUESDAY, MAY 09, 2006

Criminal statistics

Polly claims today, in a piece about the recent local elections, that we should:

Take Hammersmith and Fulham: it boasted the biggest fall in crime

It is a claim she has made before, and it wasn't sourced or qualified then either.

At the time of writing, as was the case before the local elections, this claim is not supported by the

Metropolitan Police's Crime Figures website which, as of 9 May 2006, shows that Hammersmith & Fulham had seen a 4.7% decrease in crime on a rolling 12-month basis.

Good. Very good, even. But not as good as Barnet's 8% drop, Sutton's 5.1% drop, Wandsworth's 4.8% drop, or Lambeth's 8.3% drop, and so on.

Of course, it is probably possible to find or construct some measure of crime on which Hammersmith & Fulham has seen the largest fall over a carefully chosen period. However, due to Toynbee's cavalier use of the facts we don't know whether she has carefully chosen the definition and the time period to suit her thesis, or whether she has just made the statistic up.

Sources, please!

FRIDAY, MAY 12, 2006

Right to lie?

Today's column, on the right to die, contains this quote:

In the polls, over 80% support the right to die and have done for the last 25 years.

The best poll I know of in the UK for measuring changes in social attitudes is the British Social Attitudes Survey. Care to guess what they have to say about the issue? Well, they report that:

Opinion polls show that not only do euthanasia and assisted suicide already enjoy the support of a substantial majority of the UK population, but also that this support is actually growing. A 75% majority in favour of permitting medical assistance in the ending the life of a sufferer from a painful, incurable disease in 1984 increased to 79% in 1989, and 82% in 1994

This is from British Social Attitudes Report, 1996. Now I appreciate not every library has a copy of the tome. It is, however, quoted here.

Even Dignity in Dying, referenced by Pollyanna in the column, have on their website the historical results of polls, showing that support did not exceed 80% until 1994.

Needless to say, the facts do not bear out Polly's contention that an 80% majority have supported the right to die for over 25 years.

Worstall:

May 12, 2006

The Joffe Kill the Sick Bill

Here is Polly Toynbee with some entirely fatuous twaddle about the right to an easy death at the time of your choosing.

Here is a Doctor writing on the same subject:

I have looked after more terminally ill patients than I care to think about and, as I get older, it gets more and more difficult. I have never killed a patient. I have never been asked to kill a patient. I have never done anything to a patient with the intention of accelerating death.

As you might guess, the opinion of the professional in the field is rather different from Polly's. Humourous,

too (Dr, Crippen was the pseudonym of a blogging medico at this time):

Crippen: *Good morning, Mrs Davies, and how are you today?*

Mrs Davies: *Not at all well, I'm afraid, Doctor. Would you mind killing me?*

Crippen: *Certainly, Mrs Davies. I have a slot free at 2.30 pm this afternoon. Would you like to be despatched here in the health centre or at home?*

Mrs Davies: *The health centre would be fine, doctor.*

Crippen: *Excellent! See you this afternoon.*

As ever, RTWT.

Update: Bill delayed for 6 months and likely to return next session. A couple of quotes that sum up my view (which is in fact a little more sophisticated than Alex purports in the comments):

Lord Carey of Clifton, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, said: "If introduced, assisted suicide might be treated as casually as abortion is today, after a few years."

There was also strong opposition from the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, who said the Bill sent out a message that "certain kinds of life are not worth living".

Dr Williams told peers that if the proposals became law "we would also jeopardise the security of the vulnerable by radically changing the relationship between patient and physician".

Lord Carlile, QC, the Liberal Democrat peer who tabled the amendment for a six-month delay, branded the Bill "morally indefensible". He said he did not want Britain to follow the Netherlands, which he said was considering extending euthanasia to "babies with learning difficulties".

It's the beginning of a slippery slope and as I don't like what is at the bottom of it then obviously I oppose us starting down it.

TUESDAY, MAY 16, 2006

Ironic quote marks?

Today's column is relatively free from fiction masquerading as facts (they are, of course, all relatively free of facts). However, Polly makes up for it by mangling a quote. Consider this quote from Pollyanna's column:

Professor Roger Silverstone, of the LSE, calls the research hopeful, "revealing the emergence of a dynamic, socially engaged and environmentally conscious" voter - not a few, but 20 million.

Now compare that with (and most certainly not to) the actual Silverstone quote from this BBC page:

Roger Silverstone, Professor of Media and Communications at the London School of economics [sic] says: "This is, in many respects, a significant and indeed a hopeful piece of research.

"It reveals the emergence of a dynamic, socially-engaged and environmentally conscious consumer at the heart of British culture which should have real consequences for the ways in which commodities are bought and sold, and media are consumed."

We can skip lightly over Polly's "revealing" and the original "reveals" -- this is the sort of attention to detail that we only expect from credible journalists. However, the substitution of "voter" for "consumer" is quite a

big one, particularly as Silverstone goes on to talk about the consumption of commodities and media, and not about voting intentions.

I understand, of course, why Pollyanna does not quote one of the findings from the research -- that "86% of Big Britons claim they find it increasingly difficult to trust what they read" (you can find the quote on the BBC website linked to above) -- given her own manipulation and fabrications.

Unclear

On days like today, I feel disappointed I elected to critique factual accuracy rather than, say, writing style. In today's column, potatoes are launched, and herrings hijack. She manages to speak to the energy minister, Malcolm Wicks, and she writes:

So I asked Malcolm Wicks the vital question.

The vital question, it turns out, is this:

Will nuclear power get any special inducement not offered to other forms of energy generation? Will there be a genuinely level playing field giving every prospective form of clean energy the same chance to prove its viability? That means nuclear power stations would have to pay not only for their waste storage, but the high cost of full insurance: currently they only cover themselves up to a paltry £140m of risk - so a Chernobyl would leave the state picking up a huge bill for compensation and clean-up. Will future nuclear generators be forced to pay into a fund each year enough money to cover all their own decommissioning? The state is now paying a £70bn bill to close existing stations - with the price still rising.

127 words, five sentences and three questions. Bafflingly, Wicks replies "yes" four times to three questions. I also enjoyed the setup to the interview with Wicks, which was:

Bumping into him yesterday, he gave a wry shrug

The image of someone shrugging wryly as they bump into themselves will stay with me for a while.

I am also disappointed that I choose to quibble on facts rather than on logic, as the triumphant glee with which Polly suggests that people won't invest in nuclear power stations because the benefits are public policy ones rather than private ones can surely not be the same Polly Toynbee who wrote in her previous column that

money doesn't buy as much happiness as common social goods. Taxes are good value: health, education, the arts, parks or sports are more precious and pleasurable than anything bought in a shop.

Incidentally, I value food -- which, tediously, I sometimes buy in a shop -- above sports.

But no, I had to go and set myself up as someone who critiques the (non-)facts. Luckily this is not onerous.

She writes

Writing yesterday in the Financial Times, Alexander Johnston, from a leading consultancy to Fortune 100 companies, lays out the terms he thinks investors would require.

I presume she is referring by "leading consultancy" to Arthur D Little, on whose advisory board Johnston sits. Arthur D Little is (no offence) not a leading consultancy to Fortune 100 companies. It has had a fair share of economic trouble, having filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the US and having to sell itself off (see, for example, this news story). Its website currently shows only two US office locations -- Boston

and Houston. I am sure it is a fine company full of worthy professionals, but it is not, say, a McKinsey.

Polly also writes:

Look how simply labelling white goods with energy-saving ratings made virtually all of them AAA in a short time.

I think she may mean *new* white goods sold (unless she thinks the labelling scheme has somehow magically made washing machines bought in the 1980's more energy efficient). Even given this generous leeway, it's not strictly speaking true. As a quick check, I had a quick look at the washing machines John Lewis offers on its website. The first four on offer were:

- John Lewis JLWM1202 Washing Machine, White
- AEG L16830 Washer Dryer, White
- Miele WT2670 Washer Dryer, White
- Zanussi ZWF1421 Washing Machine, White

The energy ratings, respectively, were: A+; B; A+; and A.

I know this is not a rigorous empirical test, nor is it statistically robust. But it is enough for me to not believe that "virtually all of them [are] AAA".

Worstall

May 16, 2006

La Polla

Wow.

Labour's only reason for existing is to stand for fairness, protect the underdog and know that money doesn't buy as much happiness as common social goods. Taxes are good value: health, education, the arts, parks or sports are more precious and pleasurable than anything bought in a shop.

Obviously Polly has yet to be introduced to parts of the Anne Summers catalogue. "More pleasurable" indeed.

The actual argument is not that common social goods are important or not. Of course, they are. But do they have to be provided via taxation? No, they don't. Can they be provided privately? Well, some cannot, or not without hugely deleterious side effects. Think national defense or criminal legal system here. We can indeed have multiple, competing, armed forces and indeed we have done. Feudalism was an example and we think that having the State with a monopoly of legitimate violence is a rather better solution than private armies with a penchant for taking over the country rather than defending it.

But are health, education, the arts, parks and sports such common social goods that can only be provided by the State. Or even more effectively provided by the State? Obviously not as shown by the list there. Sport is privately provided. The others can be and are privately (in part) provided and amazingly, the standards provided by that private provision seem to be higher than that via taxation.

The error in Polly's thinking is exactly that. That common social goods can only be provided via taxation. Profoundly nonsensical.

Worstell

May 19, 2006

Polly on Nuclear

Amazing, a Polly Toynbee piece that I almost sort of agree with.

It is big, bold, manly - an apparent quick fix for everything tricky in energy policy. It takes nerve and risk, it tickles the concrete-pouring industries, and it upsets the woolly types.

Well, if you really wanted to upset the woolly types you'd actually point out that wind power requires more concrete poured than nuclear does: and that therefore CO2 emissions from the two forms of generation are roughly similar.

Banning incandescent light bulbs and stand-by buttons on TVs, printers etc would save vast amounts.

Banning? Polly's natural Statism seems to be coming to the fore here. Incandescents are on the way out anyway, the new LED based bulbs will take over over the next decade. But it does take time for things to change, people aren't going to do it overnight. It'll happen, properly, as renovations and new build take place.

But on the major point:

In estimating the true price, private markets will do far better than any government department. As, alas, proved over and over in PFI and PPP contracts, private investors propelled by Adam Smith's hidden hand of profit will always trump state planners in striking the best deal for themselves. So leave it to them to decide if nuclear, with the full cost of all its risks, really is a cheaper option than offshore wind, tidal and wave power or coal-fired stations with carbon sequestration. Let the state set out safety and planning laws, set renewables obligations and carbon-trading schemes and then let investors decide on an absolutely level playing field.

OK, I'm fine with that. It may well be, as D2 repeatedly points out, that this means nuclear won't be built. But do let us insist that it is in fact a level playing field. Currently there are renewables obligations...distribution companies have to buy a certain percentage from such sources. At a premium. Why should nuclear not get this? Or why should that requirement not be abolished? Level playing field anyone? The Climate Change Levy which applies to nuclear but not to renewables: both or neither, surely? Planning permission for wind farms over rides any local objections...level playing field anyone?

If there is indeed a level playing field and no new nuclear gets built. I'm fine with that. Thing is, you see, I really do believe what Polly's rather sneering at. That markets, most of the time, work.

FRIDAY, MAY 19, 2006

Pollyannonymous

In a post today on Comment is Free, Polly writes of people who criticise her anonymously:

Tell me something else, how many of you bother to buy the Guardian? Here we are, the only non-profit paper with no megalomaniac owner, like all newspapers in need of paying readers at a time when the press is in decline.

Given that the paper loses money and the website makes money, I would be positively encouraging the bloggers and discouraging people from buying the paper. But then I am a sucker for what Polly calls "Adam Smith's hidden hand of profit" and the rest of us call the invisible hand.

Worstell

May 19, 2006

Polly Cracks!

After years of relentless piss-taking, Polly Toynbee finally cracked:

Anonymity is the problem. Why don't all of you say who you are? Why hide your names and email addresses?

Err, it's The Guardian set up that doesn't publish emails.

Tim Worstell you pendant, what on earth is your life and view of the world? Do you ever see the light of day?

Amazing, seeing that we've actually exchanged emails, that she thought my name was a pseudonym.

And it really did have to be that word she misspelled, didn't it?

Not knowing your enemy

Incidentally, I think the broad swipe of today's article, lumping together people who quibble with Polly's gift for inaccurate *precis* with people who bombard her with *ad hominem* abuse quite an underhand attempt to deflect criticism.

No column in the Guardian today, but I notice that Polly has contributed to the May/June issue of Progress magazine in the form of a column called Any Questions. From that column come this question and answer:

If you were able to spend an hour with one dead, historical figure, who would it be and what would you ask them?

Abraham – Could you be dissuaded from founding three world religions which will cause more bloodshed and despair for more millennia than you could possibly imagine?

Founding? Really? Inspiring, maybe. Being a central figure in the development of, maybe. But founding? Is it really believable that a day or two after his death one could have asked any of his contemporaries what they thought of Christianity or of Islam?

UPDATE: There now appears to be a Polly column on CommentisFree.com, though not on the main Guardian site. Apologies, fact check to follow.

TUESDAY, MAY 23, 2006

Apologies again for the late discovery of today's column by Polly; I could not find it through

www.guardian.co.uk's search feature, and actually still can't as at the time of writing. It does, however, appear on Comment is Free here. She starts by saying:

Here global warming is measured by how often the steel gates are closed; in 1987, it was only once every two years: now it's four times a year, eight times more often.

You can see the detail here -- the figures are a lot noisier than you might think from this description. In fact, the barrier had to close six times in 1990, and not at all in 1991. Nine times in 1993 and only once in 1994. Only twice in 2004 and 2005, though this comes after 18 times in 2003.

Later on she says:

If in 1987 the prudent designers of the Thames barrier built in expectation of global warming...

Actually, if the designers of the Thames Barrier were building anything in 1987, I hope it was a time machine. According to the Environment Agency, "it became operational in 1982" (source). The Thames Barrier, I mean, not the time machine.

Of Thames Water, Polly says:

targets for fixing leaks have all been missed.

Strangely, when we look at Ofwat's "Security of supply, leakage and the efficient use of water 2004/5" report (pdf link here), and the section on Thames Water (pages 39-40), we find quotes like:

The other positive aspect of the company's performance in 2004-05 was that its area outside London had leakage performance in line with targets and at a level comparable to other companies in England and Wales.

And

Thames' quarterly progress reports actually showed it to be on target until a late winter leakage spike at the end of February 2005...

and

This was the first objective achieved.

I am not a big fan of Thames Water and their performance in finding and fixing leaks, but the picture is a little more nuanced than we are led to believe.

Worstall

May 23, 2006

Polly on Water

Given that Polly Toynbee has now called me a pendant, that is a decoration and an ornament (perhaps one that should spend considerable amounts of time nestling between a decent set of norks) I'd say that now is the time to come out as a pedant in order to have a little look at her offering of today.

From the control tower of the Thames barrier, gaze down on one of London's heroic wonders. Those gigantic silver sails stretching half a mile across the river float above the water, standing guard against the rising risk of flood. Here global warming is measured by how often the steel gates are closed; in 1987, it was only once every two years: now it's four times a year, eight times more often. By the century's end the barrier will close 300 times a year at this pace of climate change.

The river is rising 6.6mm a year, with more storms and extremes as ice caps melt. Monitoring the incoming water at coastal stations from Wick to Lowestoft, the barrier men have never yet been taken by surprise. At the highest tide ever, in February 2004, there was a flood alert on 14 successive tides: none of the men went home for a week.

Mmmhmm. Thames Barrier. Climate change, mmm, lovely. It might be worth noting that the Barrier wasn't actually built because of climate change at all. And that its increasing use is not solely (part of it is but by no means all) to do with climate change either. From the Environment Agency:

Tide levels are steadily increasing owing to a combination of factors. These include higher mean sea levels, greater storminess, increasing tide amplitude, the tilting of the British Isles (with the south eastern corner tipping downwards) and the settlement of London on its bed of clay.

As a result tide levels are rising in the Thames Estuary, relative to the land, by about 60cm per century, Surge tides are a particular threat and occur under certain meteorological conditions. When a trough of low pressure moves across the Atlantic towards the British Isles, the sea beneath it rises above the normal level thus creating a 'hump' of water, which moves eastwards with the depression.

My apologies as this is from memory but the tilting of the land, a result of the end of the last Ice Age, is responsible for some 23 cm per century. The shrinkage of the London subsoil for some further unknown (to me) amount. Climate change is part of it, yes, but most certainly not all or even half of it, unlike the impression Polly gives.

However, one privatisation will always stand out as an unequivocal scandal: the privatisation of water. It is used all over the world as a classic example of what not to do. Making millions out of an element that falls freely from the skies - profiteering from rivers, rain and clouds - affronted most citizens.

It might indeed affront many citizens but then so what? Water does indeed fall from the skies for free but someone has to collect it, purify it, pipe it and thus, in some manner, charge for all of that work. And clean up the (literally) crap left behind. The question actually is, which is the most efficient method of doing this? That is, how do we get the job done while using the least resources to do so? It might be that the government doing it directly is. It might be that the spur to efficiency generated by the possibility of profit is. That's an

empirical question, one that we should look to empirical evidence to answer. Like this piece from The Economist (sorry, subscription):

PRIVATISED in England, a mutual in Wales, a nationalised industry in Scotland and a government department in Northern Ireland—there is no better proving ground for different ideas about utility provision than Britain's water industry.

...

All that might be excusable if the aquacrats were doing much better with the extra money. But in fact Scots get poorer drinking water, more pollution from their sewers and their pipes are more than twice as leaky. Private water firms beat the public sector on all counts.

What's gone wrong? After all, a publicly owned water industry does not have to pay dividends to shareholders and can borrow money at lower interest rates than private firms. "Essentially, the service was run by engineers," says Alan Alexander, chairman of Scottish Water, a new company formed in 2002 by a merger of three regional state-owned utilities. "No-one gave much thought to economics." Politics has also played a role. The utility has been in thrall to trade unions, so it is over-manned. And the need to keep politicians sweet may explain why business charges have risen so much faster than the domestic bills most voters pay.

Scotland's water regulator, Alan Sutherland reckons that about £86—more than a third—of the £231 average domestic bill in 2001-02 was wasted. So ministers told Scottish Water to cut its costs by 45% by 2005-06. Bills won't start coming down until 2007, though, because the company must find £1.8 billion to spend on upgrading its pipes and sewers. Scotland's costly water is a salutary reminder of the cost of the country's love affair with state provision. Better to privatise it late than never.

Hmmm. Looks like private provision is in fact more efficient.

Now as global warming swells the Thames perilously, Thames Water is running dry. Hosepipe bans may become permanent, with the south as dry as Sudan.

Climate change is going to make the south-east permanently drier? Gosh, that would be interesting. Do you think Polly actually reads the paper she works for?

The real reason for the drought is essentially a lack of rainfall over the past nine months. In winter and spring, most reservoirs get replenished, but in the UK, for example, the past six months have seen barely two-thirds of the average expected rainfall.

Professor Saunders says that the current situation is a result of natural climate variability. Drought trends going back more than 100 years show this sort of natural cycle repeating itself time and again. He also rules out global warming as a contributing factor since it is expected to cause wetter winters.

See that? Climate change will lead to wetter winters: that is, in a country like the UK (in common with the rest of Western Europe) where the majority of rainfall is in the winter, less droughts.

Great. So, Polly has done it again. Her three major contentions (and this is without either her or me mentioning the EU drinking water directives which is where all the money has actually been spent: the latest

imposes a constraint that tap water must be purer than bottled mineral water.) are that:

- 1) The increase in the use of the Thames Barrier is all to do with climate change. No, only partially so.
- 2) That privatisation is less efficient than not. Not so, distinctly not so.
- 3) That climate change will make the droughts permanent. Not so, it'll actually make them less likely.

How excellent, eh? Polly, a small suggestion. Hire yourself a pedant will you?

Update: Scott Burgess has a link to a paper on winter rains even more believable than The Guardian's.

Better or Worse? p.78

In a quiet fifteen minutes, I have discovered a new game -- opening my copy of *Better or Worse?*, the 2005 book written by Polly Toynbee and David Walker, to a random page and seeing how many dubious facts I could find. This morning, it was page 78 (my copy is a Bloomsbury paperback).

I found this quote:

In the media they [apparently newspaper editors and BBC directors] controlled, they reflected a world of privilege -- so a threat to private school education or private health was wrongly described as an attack on 'middle England'.

When I Google "attack on middle England", I get seven results - maybe the problem is not as severe as Polly thinks? Of the seven, four are from the media (two are from Hansard, and one from Amazon). Of the four media citations:

- One was from the BBC in 2002, talking about the tax increases in the 2002 budget. Note that the 2002 increases were in National Insurance contributions, and were not threats to private education or private health *per se*
- One was from the, er, Guardian, and quoted Gordon Brown denying that the national insurance increases in the 2002 budget were an attack on middle England. No reference to private health or education
- One was from the Mirror, and which contained this curiously ungrammatical sentence: "Who view *every tax and welfare payment* as a financial attack on Middle England." [emphasis added] If you go and read the piece in the Mirror (it's OK, you don't have to) it seems to be referring to John Redwood. Note, again, no reference to private education or health
- The final quote I can find from the UK media is this, from Money Marketing Live: 'One of the big Budget surprises was Gordon Brown's attack on Middle England with his proposed inheritance tax changes on trusts. These are considered by many to be ill-thought-out and totally unjustified. They are retroactive, to use Government terminology, and can apply to existing trusts in certain circumstances.' John Wolley, MM, 20 April 2006." Given the quote is dated after Polly's book was published, she can't really be referring to this. And it doesn't refer to private health or education

So, four quotes from the media, none of which refers to private education or private health.

Incidentally, for those interested in Polly Toynbee's salary, consider the sentence which comes immediately before the one I quoted above, which I reproduce in its entirety here:

Newspaper editors and BBC directors and everyone they knew in their hermetic worlds all earned many multiples of £100,000.

I take this to mean that Polly must be earning many multiples of £100,000.

My other big problem with page 78 comes with these two sentences:

Professor Richard Layard showed how people draw a sense of their esteem and worth from their relative place in a nation's pecking order. Asked a hypothetical question, most say they would choose to have less money in a society where everyone had a fairer share, than more absolute wealth in a society where everyone else was far richer.

As well as getting her facts wrong, another Polly Toynbee trait is to quote apparent facts without a source, making it difficult to judge whether the fact is accurate or not -- as happens with the "hypothetical question" she refers to above. So, with no real guidance as to where it came from, I am assuming it comes from Layard's work, a lot of which is posted here(*). The closest thing in Layard's work which I can find to Polly's hypothetical question is this little experiment:

A sample of Harvard graduate students were asked:

1. Which of these two worlds would you prefer? (Prices are the same in each)

A. You get \$50k and others get half that.

B. You get \$100k but others get more than double that.

2. Which of these two worlds would you prefer?

C. You get 2 weeks holiday and others get half that.

D. You get 4 weeks holiday but others get twice that.

The majority answered A to question 1, and D to question 2

This is taken from "Towards a happier society". I may be wrong, and this is not what Polly is referring to -- and I will withdraw this critique if this turns out to be the case (though not my criticism about inadequate sourcing).

My first problem is that Harvard graduate students, lovely though they may be, are hardly a representative sample of the UK population. Secondly, the two scenarios described in A and B are hardly different in their levels of inequality -- in both cases they seem pretty equal societies with one outlier, the respondent. This is *not* a test of whether we want everyone to have "a fairer share" or not.

THURSDAY, MAY 25, 2006

Better or Worse? p.190

More opening of the book to a random page. On page 190 of *Better or Worse?*, Toynbee and Walker write:

"...by 2005 it [i.e. DFID] was pushing £9 out of every £10 in UK aid to low-income countries. Half of DFID's bilateral aid went to Africa..."

No. According to the DFID's Statistics on International Development 2005 (aka SID), in 2004/5 DFID's total bilateral programme was £2.14bn, of which £0.87bn went to Africa (source: Table 11 of SID. pdf link here). This is 40%, not half.

Similarly, £1.42bn went to low-income countries (see p.4 of the pdf linked above). Of DFID's total bilateral programme, I make this about £6.59 out of every £10, and not £9.

But this is DFID's bilateral aid, whereas Polly's "£9 out of every £10" figure ostensibly refers to all aid, and DFID's bilateral programme is only a portion of all UK aid. In 2003/4, for example, total gross public expenditure on bilateral aid was some £2.61bn (of which some £1.97bn was spent through DFID -- comparable to the £2.14bn figure for 2004/5 quoted above), whereas total gross public expenditure on aid of all kinds was £4.74bn (source: *Annual Abstract of Statistics 2005*, p.9. The two series I am referring to are LUQL and LUPI). The difference is made up of moneys given to multilateral agencies to spend, of which by far and away the largest proportion goes to the European Community for them to disburse. Could they be spending so much money on supporting low-income countries to make Polly's figures accurate? Sadly, probably not. Says who? Says Polly:

Gordon Brown was critical of the EU's aid programme which dispensed £6bn a year. Instead of hitting the most extreme poverty, money flowed to favoured areas, notably the Balkans...

This quote is from *Better or Worse?*, p.190.

FRIDAY, MAY 26, 2006

OFFS

In today's column, Polly writes about the by-elections to the Wyre borough Council in Lancashire. She writes:

Last Thursday, two weeks after the main local elections, there was a byelection in Park Ward, the poorest in Lancashire and the second-safest Labour seat in the county; activists piled in to support a good local candidate. But they were shocked to lose, with a staggering 27% swing to the Tories in a seat that was never Tory before.

Well, actually, the last time the ward was contested, in May 2003, the ward had two seats, so actually no-one had held that one single seat before (see, for example, here). Polly also writes that:

Labour is already delivering more babies: the ONS suggests a rise in the birth rate is partly due to mothers getting more help.

A nice pun, but an unsourced claim. I cannot find any reference to the ONS saying why the birth rate has increased -- indeed, their 18 May press release of the figures is just a bland statement of the facts. On the other hand, according to the, er, Guardian on 19 May:

"We looked at the reasons for this slight, hopeful rise," said Julia Margo, author of a report called Population Politics published in February by the Institute for Public Policy Research. "It seems to map on to 2001 when Labour started pushing on family friendly policies and childcare. There is a better deal now from government than ever before." But, she added, there were other possible reasons that do not hold out promise for the rise across all groups which is needed for a sustained increase in births. "We don't have access to the background data, which would tell us whether there are socio-economic differences, whether professional women will still be having less children." It could be that the rise is restricted to poorer women and those from migrant groups, who traditionally have had larger families.

So, it's not the ONS, which is a non-partisan government department, but rather the Institute for Public Policy Research which isn't. And it "seems to map" and they "don't have access to the background data." But otherwise an accurate summary.

UPDATE: In the column, Polly also writes that:

Surveying their staff at the Treasury, the officer class have just discovered that 88% of them have never worked for anyone but Gordon Brown.

This doesn't really seem to square with HM Treasury's *Departmental Report* of June 2005 ([pdf link here](#)) which says on page 47 that:

The Treasury encourages staff to gain outside experience through secondments to both other government departments and the private sector. ... In 2004, 52 per cent of all new entrants were loaned or seconded in, and 16 per cent of the total staff in post at the end of 2004 were either on loan or seconded.

Similarly 12 per cent of Treasury staff were on loan or seconded out to other organisations. [emphasis added]

TUESDAY, MAY 30, 2006

Queue Rating

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

Chris Smith is one of the few politicians to retire knowing he has done something brilliant - restoring free entry to museums and galleries, swelling attendances by 50%.

I hadn't appreciated that a seat in the House of Lords counted as retirement, but anyway. Swelling museum

attendance by 50% looks like quite a good thing, until you consult the official figures. According to the ONS figures cited here, visits to museums and art galleries increased by 6% between 1997 and 2002. *Social Trends 36* (the 2006 edition) says that between 2002 and 2003 they increased by 1% and between 2003 and 2004 they increased by 4%.

When we look at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's website, we can find a press release lauding the increase in visitor numbers here. The figures revealed are fascinating -- particularly in Table 3 which is linked to at the end of the press release.

Charges affected fewer than 30% of museum visits back when the charges were scrapped in 2001. Since then, there has been a 67% increase in visits to museums which used to charge (69% in the first year, so actually a fall after the first year boost). Museums which were always free saw a 2% increase. Overall visits increased 21%.

And not 50%.

UPDATE: Also in the column, Polly writes:

Creative Partnerships was set up in just 36 deprived areas to bring artists of all kinds to work in 1,100 of the poorest schools.

No. Creative Partnerships was set up in just 16 areas. It was then expanded to 34 and subsequently 36. For detail, see the Creative Partnerships website or the, er, *Guardian*.

Worstell

May 30, 2006

Polly on the Arts

Polly Toynbee today praises the arts. Excellent. She also calls for more tax money to be spent on them. Hhmm. Puffing your own interests possibly Polly?

The Brighton festival, which I chair, ended its three exuberant weeks on Sunday, celebrating a 40th anniversary as England's biggest arts festival, (second in Britain only to Edinburgh). Half a million people came to see performances from the highest to the lowest art, opening with a parade of 70 primary schools, all the children dressed as food. Was the high spot the Groupe F pyrotechnics arts performance, with 70,000 people out in Preston Park, or was it Dawn Upshaw singing in the Brighton Dome with the Australian Chamber Orchestra?

These things bursting out up and down the land are as good a measure of wellbeing as any. But they all cost money.

Far be it for me to suggest a solution here: why don't those who enjoy such things pay for them directly?

Artists working with teachers works. It costs £32,000 per school, but head-teachers say they get

far more value from it than they would from an extra teacher:

Excellent. Which is of course why we need to set the schools free. Why, we might even adopt the system from Polly's favourite country, Sweden. A pure voucher system. Head teachers would be able to spend their budget on whatever it was that they thought in the best interests of their pupils.

Rather than the system we have at present which is that they have to spend it on whatever the central bureaucracy decides they should. But then that would mean that they might not decide to spend it on a festival which Polly chairs and that would never do now would it?

FRIDAY, JUNE 02, 2006

Numerical fragility

Today's Polly Toynbee column says of the tax credit system:

That means 20% will be overpaid and 10% will be underpaid. How bad is that? Not all that bad. The standard error rate of the social security system for means-tested benefits under all governments has always been around 10%.

Actually, if you are overpaying 20% and underpaying 10%, that means an error rate of 30%, considerably higher than the already generous 10% error rate Polly cites.

She then goes on to say:

But most of these over- and underpayments are not errors. The whole point of the system is to make sure families can keep on an even keel when their incomes change. Overpayment happens if they fail to declare when their household incomes rise, when earning more, moving in with an earning partner or stopping childcare, or when a child reaches 18. Families are underpaid if they fail to claim when their income drops or they have another child.

Overpayments also happen because of government error, of course. The IFS, cited approvingly later on the article in a different context, has some interesting research here on this. To save you reading the entire thing, consider just the headline:

Government paying tax credits and benefits to 200,000 more lone parents than live in the UK

When Polly does cite the IFS, she says:

according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, tax credits have delivered "the longest sustained fall in child poverty since records began" - 700,000 fewer children now live below the poverty line, back to levels of 20 years ago

I think a reasonable person would think from this inaccurate *précis* that the IFS were claiming that the fall of 700,000 children in child poverty was due to the tax credits. In fact, their research says on page 46 that:

The size of the population effect depends on the overall change in the number of children and on the average poverty risk. The table shows that the fall in the number of children reduced child poverty by around 42,000

On page 49, they go on to say that:

To summarise a complicated set of changes, child poverty fell primarily because

- there were large falls in the risk of poverty for children in workless families, those with part-time working lone parents and those in couple families with one full-time parent and one non-working parent*
- there was a substantial decline in the proportion of children living in workless families.*

So part of the fall was attributable to a fall in the number of children, and part was due to a 'substantial decline' in children living in workless families. Which is not to say that the tax credits haven't helped, or that a fall in unemployment is a bad thing. It is to say that there is more at work than the tax credit system.

And finally, in the very paragraph where she talk of Osborne's "numerical fragility", she misses the point of an average, as represented by the idea of the so-called 'Tax Freedom Day'. In a nutshell, it represents the proportion of total national income which is paid to the government in the form of tax as a day on the calendar. This is an average. Polly rightly implies that the day will occur sooner for people earning less, however she wrongly states that it will occur on that precise day for the "very.very rich, of course -- the Notting Hill people." Averages rarely represent the true figure for individuals (the old cliché is that no-one has the average number of legs).

Worstall

June 02, 2006

Commenting Upon Polly Toynbee

Aiieeeee! Disaster!

Polly Toynbee's piece appears today on The Guardian website.

It has a comment button below it, but no comments as yet (1.15 pm UK time). Why is this? When I attempt it, I get a "No such entry '003309'."

What has happened? A bug in the software? Or a feature? Is it just me that cannot comment? All of us? Or can we only not comment on Polly Toynbee's piece? Perhaps most importantly, am I to blame for any of this?

Comment I wished to leave:

I was getting worried that we wouldn't be able to comment on this piece. Or perhaps that only I would not be able to. But we can now, hurrah!

"He is the man who flirts with flat tax, the simplest tax of all - but also the most regressive, taking the least from the wealthiest."

Err, no. Whether a flat tax is more or less regressive than the system we have now depends upon where the personal allowance is set, what the tax rate is and how many, if any, of the other exemptions, allowances and loopholes remain. Many of those under discussion, like the Adam Smith Institute's one, is more progressive than the current system.

"Who exactly are the "people" who stop working for the state on June 3?"

It's an average. So, on average, everyone. If you don't like the use of averages then perhaps you might stop saying things like on average women get paid less than men? Which individuals? Look, over there, there's a Guardian columnist, female, who gets paid much more than most men! Top 1 % even!

"...consider first that a third of adults pay no income tax anyway."

Stunning fact! 48 million adults, 29.7 million in the labour force, 30.5 million odd in the income tax system...gee, you think that there might be people economically inactive which is why they don't pay income tax?

"Make a year's paid maternity,"

Many researchers think that the years out of the labour force increase the gender pay gap (even some reports sponsored by the current Labour Government). Why do you want to increase this?

Obviously that first para is a little in error now.

Worstall

June 02, 2006

Polly Again

I'm not sure about this you know, several people seem to think that I should stop writing about Polly Toynbee. Mother and Father, for example. No doubt there are others ("Please, puhleeeze, Tim, don't write anything more about Polla!" perhaps?) so perhaps I should start reading The Independent instead?

Yet something forces me back, like today's offering:

It's not in the least surprising. He is the man who flirts with flat tax, the simplest tax of all - but also the most regressive, taking the least from the wealthiest.

Oh dear. A flat tax could indeed be less progressive than the current system. It could be more progressive too. Polly seems to be getting confused between the headline rate of tax (10%, 22%, 40% aren't they still?) and the total amount of one's income that is paid in tax. This latter is the one that counts and is of course hugely distorted by allowances, perks, loopholes and so on.

Of the various flat tax proposals out there many (most certainly the one put forward by the Adam Smith Institute) is more progressive than the current system. How progressive such a system is depends upon where the tax free allowance is set (the higher the more progressive) and where the flat tax is set (the higher the more progressive) and how many allowances there are (the fewer the more progressive...assuming that the richer you are the more likely you are to take advantage of various investment dodges and so on).

His speech began with that rousing old battle cry: "This Saturday - June 3 - we celebrate Tax Freedom Day. That is the point in the year when people stop working for the chancellor and start earning for themselves." This tellingly spurious factoid hints at his numerical fragility. Who exactly are the "people" who stop working for the state on June 3? Only the very, very rich, of course - the Notting Hill people.

Not sure about this claim. Anyone else got any ideas?

It can't be calculated exactly, since you can't apportion to individuals such things as corporation tax, nor individual VAT spending habits.

Well, yes you can. Page 5 of this report (.pdf) by Patrick Minford.

But to get some idea why this "tax freedom day" only applies to the rich, consider first that a third of adults pay no income tax anyway.

Hmmm. Interesting number that. Adult population of the UK is some 48 million. According to Nationmaster, labour force is a tadge under 30 million. So, err, if I've got my numbers right, 66.6% pay income tax but only 62.5% actually work. Pretty good income tax system there, it appears to tax all those who work and a few who don't.

Only 11% pay tax at the higher rate, and less than 1% earn £100,000 or more.

Does make me wonder why so much time is spent on all the lovely things that could be bought if only this tiny fraction paid more in tax.

In fact, only 10% of families, those earning over £58,000, are not eligible for any credits.

Well, yes, that's one of the complaints actually. That the current system encourages all to be supplicants to an embracing State. But that's opinion rather than fact checking so perhaps I should leave it there.

SUNDAY, JUNE 04, 2006

Better or Worse? p.209

Today, my copy of *Better or Worse?* fell open to page 209. On it, Polly Toynbee and David Walker write:

In February 2003, Tony Blair stepped in to make another of his eye-catching promises. He pledged to halve the number of asylum seekers within six months.

Actually, no. This is how a *Guardian* report from 8 February 2003 characterised what he said:

"I would like to see us reduce it by 30% to 40% in the next few months and I think by September of this year we should have it halved. I think we can get below that then, in the years to come," he said on BBC2's Newsnight.

February to September is of course seven and not six months, but even that is a relatively minor inaccuracy. Consider what the *Guardian* report goes on to say:

The Home Office made clear that the baseline which will officially be used to judge the success or failure of the prediction will be the as yet unpublished monthly figure for asylum applications in October 2002

So actually, the (clarified) promise was actually to halve the number between October 2002 and September 2003 -- what those of who are not numerically fragile think of as eleven rather than six months.

Toynbee and Walker go on to say in their book that:

But Blair hit his target. Asylum numbers were cut in half in six months.

The truth is quite ironic. Blair didn't meet what Polly says his target was -- a halving between February 2003 and September 2003 -- in both months the number of asylum applications was about 4,250 (forgive the imprecision -- I am reading this numbers from a graph on page 3 of *Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2004*, prepared by the Immigration Research and Statistics Service, Research Development and Statistics Directorate of the Home Office. They don't provide the numbers behind the chart, but my reading should be accurate to within +/- 100. pdf link to the report here).

OK, that bit wasn't ironic, but this is. Blair *did* hit his actual (and not Polly's mangled) target -- asylum applications fell from 8,770 in October 2002 to some 4,250 in September 2003. And asylum applications *did* fall by half in six months -- 8,770 in October 2002 to about 2,500 in April 2003 -- just not the six months Polly is talking about.

Looking back on the figures, it is interesting to note, parenthetically, that Blair promised to halve the number of asylum seekers (compared to October 2002, as the Home Office rapidly 'clarified') in February 2003, in which month the number of asylum applicants was fewer than half that for October 2002 already. Committing to deliver the recent past seems a little unimpressive.

Toynbee and Walker go on to claim that:

The number who succeeded in getting refugee status fell fast too. In 2002 34 per cent were successful, but only 11 per cent by 2004.

Compare that to this, again from *Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2004*, but this time page 14:

Of the initial decisions made in 2004, 1,565 (3 per cent) recognised the applicant as a refugee and granted asylum, 160 (0.3 per cent) granted HP and 3,835 (8 per cent) granted DL and 40,465 (88 per cent) were refusals.

[emphasis added. 'HP' means humanitarian protection and 'DL' means discretionary leave]

So that'll be 3%, and not 11%.

TUESDAY, JUNE 06, 2006

Putting the poll into Polly

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

The latest Ipsos Mori poll yesterday put the Conservatives 10 points ahead, at 41%; only six months ago they were 10 points behind.

And yet, when we look at, oh, I don't know, say the, er, *Observer* on the 18 December 2005, in a piece headlined:

Tories seize nine-point poll lead

This is from a MORI poll, conducted between 9 and 12 December 2005, which is about as close to six months ago as we are going to get. The piece goes on to say:

Current voting intentions among the 53 per cent of the electorate who say they are 'absolutely certain' to vote in a general election show 40 per cent for the Conservatives (up 7 points), 31 per cent for Labour (down 5) and 21 per cent for the Liberal Democrats (down 2).

So even in the *previous* poll, longer than six months ago, the Labour position would have been 36% (31+5) and the Tories would have been on 33% (40-7), or three points behind.

And not ten.

How does this happen?

UPDATE: Interestingly, the ten-point Labour lead in a Mori poll is from November 2005 (source here), or *seven* months ago as I count.

UPDATE 2: The poll Polly Toynbee cites today was carried out between 25-30 May. The one showing a ten point Labour lead was carried out between 17-22 November. I therefore concede that saying Labour was ten points ahead six months ago is an acceptable approximation, and withdraw the challenge to the statement.

Note, though, that by the same standard one could equally well say that the Tories were nine points ahead six months ago.

FRIDAY, JUNE 09, 2006

Talking of re-offending...

Today's column offers a wide selection of misquoted and misinterpreted statistics. Let's start with:

Crime is in long-term decline, down 43% since 1995, according to the British Crime Survey (BCS)

According to the Home Office, (pdf link here to *Crime in England and Wales 2004/2005* -- oh, yes, by the way, it is worth noting, though Polly doesn't, that this only covers England and Wales):

Since peaking in 1995, BCS crime has fallen by 44 per cent, representing 8.5 million fewer crimes, with vehicle crime and burglary falling by over a half (both by 57%) and violent crime falling by 43 per cent during this period. [emphasis added, p.1]

But this is a minor quibble. It gets worse. Polly writes:

More criminals reoffend. The Prison Reform Trust points to official figures showing how prison overcrowding raises the reoffending rate. In 1995 56% reoffended within two years of release - now it is 67% (53% of those given community sentences reoffend).

Actually, the Home Office is quite careful to explain that they can't actually track reoffending accurately, merely reconviction. So, for example, they write in the excellent *Prison statistics England and Wales 2002* (pdf link here, p.150):

Reconviction rates are the proportion of prisoners discharged from prison that are convicted on a further occasion within a given time period (usually 2 years). They only give a minimum indication of the proportion of offenders who re-offend because not all offenders who re-offend will be caught or prosecuted.

And so therefore, an improved detection rate would increase the statistic, giving the appearance of an increase in re-offending. Have detection rates improved? Well, apparently so. Polly writes about:

...improved crime detection, the best in five years.

Polly also writes that:

...courts have 40% fewer "ineffective" trials abandoned through bungling.

We're not done the courtesy of being given a time period here, so let's assume it is compared to the Public Service Agreement baseline date of June-August 2002. The figures show that in the Crown Court, ineffective trials were only 13.3% of the total in October-December 2005, compared to the baseline rate of 23.7%. This is a cut of 44% in the *rate*, but not to be sniffed at.

The Crown Court is only half the story, though (well, actually more like a fifth, but we'll come on to that). In the *Magistrates' Courts*, the rate has again fallen, but sadly only from 30.9% to 21.2% over the same time period (figures are here). This is only a 31% cut in the *rate*.

How to weigh the two rates? According to *Criminal Statistics 2004, England and Wales* (pdf link here), in 2002 434,500 people were committed for trial at the Crown Court, and in 2004 (the latest year which they cite) it was 382,000 (Table 2.6) In Magistrates' Courts, the figures were 1,925,000 and 2,023,000 respectively. If we're generous and weigh the two rates (44% and 31%) at 1:4, we get a weighted average of 34% and not 40%. Note that this is being as generous as possible. I am also ignoring the fact that the overall number of trials is increasing -- so the absolute number of ineffective trials will be falling slower than the rate -- and also that the balance between the Crown Court (with the higher rate) and the Magistrates' Court (with the lower rate) is shifting in favour of the latter, so the rate is falling slower than the crude weighted average suggests.

UPDATE: The following quote from the column has been worrying me:

How tragically revealing that half of all prisoners are completely illiterate and another 20% have a reading age under eight.

If it were true that 70% of prisoners had a reading age below eight, it would truly be a cause for urgent concern. Luckily, it's not true. According to *Prison statistics England and Wales 2002*, referred to above,

36.9% of admitted prisoners fall below "Level 1" -- defined as roughly "about GCSE standard" and "11 year old" (the ambiguity is in the source. See table 11.4 in *Prison Statistics*, as well as the notes below it and the summary of Chapter 11 for the figures and quotes).

Now, of course 37% of prisoners having literacy levels below that of an 11 year old is too many (even if it is not "half of all prisoners are completely illiterate"), though note that this compares to about 16% for the population as a whole (see page 13 of *Reducing Re-Offending Through Skills and Employment*, HMG's Green paper on Offender Learning, available here).

Worstall

June 09, 2006

Polly Toynbee on Crime

Polly must be smoking some good stuff these days:

An unquenchable thirst for punishment has seen the numbers given prison sentences rise by 53% in the same decade that crime has fallen.

Gee, think there might be a connection? Stick the scrotes in jail and crime falls? What an amazing idea, wondrous that no one's tried it before really.

TUESDAY, JUNE 13, 2006

Stange factoids, indeed

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

The whole sector spends £25bn a year (the state spends £400bn).

Actually, at £457bn, it's closer to £500bn (see *Public sector finances, April 2006*. pdf link here). Being right to the closest £100bn is quite a low bar for accuracy...

She also says:

Is it the same nostalgic delusion that led John Major to dismantle the railways, forgetting that they would always need taxpayers' cash?

These clearly cannot be the same, apparently dismantled railways which *Social Trends 36* means on page 182:

The number of journeys made on Great Britain's railway network (including underground and metro systems) rose by 114 million between 2003/04 and 2004/05, to 2.2 billion. There were around 1.3 billion passenger journeys per year in the early 1980s and, apart from a period in the early 1990s, these numbers have generally increased. Between 1993/94 and 2004/05 passenger numbers rose by 44 per cent

Worstall

June 13, 2006XXXX

Polly Toynbee on The State

Polly Toynbee once again: she seems never to quite grasp the points that she's trying to make. Here she is as an unrepentant statist.

The heart of it lies in Cameron's words: "There is such a thing as society; it's just not the same thing as the state." This book fleshes out that abhorrence of the state and all its works, the true dividing line between left and right.

Something of a pity that she seems to be completely unaware of the anti-statist left.

Norman dates the beginning of society's downfall at precisely the point when the left would celebrate the foundation of the good society: Lloyd George's radical 1911 budget and the welfare state. But for him, here began the rot of "an invasive state" that "disrupts the voluntary bonds between people".

Well, yes, a read through *The Welfare State We're In* will show at least that some of the points about voluntary provision of services were in fact true.

So who is going to stand up and say that government is a force for good? Who will say the blindingly obvious: there is no good society without a good strong state? Markets can only thrive with strong government regulation.

Clearly true, but it does rather depend on the type of regulation. Regulation of property rights is indeed most necessary. Regulation of the type of solder used in electronic equipment, to give a current example, might be less so. Or, to go back to an old favourite, the definition of carrots as fruit, jam for the making of, might be seen as excessive regulation perhaps?

The happiest, most socially just and economically successful are those that embrace big government: the Nordics.

OK, if Polly really does think that the Nordics are the perfect society let's have a look at some of the things they do.

Sweden, for example, has nonnational minimum wage.

Sweden, for example, does not have a National Health Service. They even have private provision of health services to supplement the County Council based system:

It is also the county councils which own and run the hospitals, health centres and other health institutions, even if these institutions are supplemented by private providers which, in most cases, have contracts with the county councils to supply certain services.

That looks very like contracting out to me.

Sweden, for example, has a pure voucher system to pay for education.

Hey, bring it on!

FRIDAY, JUNE 16, 2006

Respite

Factchecking Pollyanna is on holiday until next Friday.

FRIDAY, JUNE 23, 2006

Despite

I clearly need to take more holidays.

As an anonymous commenter pointed out here, there was much fuss during the week about Polly's inaccurate attempt to criticise a critic – see <http://www.stephenpollard.net/002642.html>. Today brings a correction from the *Guardian* here:

In a column headed Britain is smiling, but it looks daggers at Labour, page 31, June 20, we accurately reported a blog posting by Janan Ganesh but incorrectly attributed to him the heading on the blog: "Let the Sudanese die - it's none of our business". The heading was not written by Mr Ganesh.

Like I said, maybe I should take more holidays?

TUESDAY, JUNE 27, 2006

Normal service resumed

In today's column, Polly writes that:

The government only just failed to pass the "incitement to religious hatred" bill because Blair himself accidentally failed to turn up to vote.

Actually, the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 did receive royal assent on the 16 February 2006

(source). The government lost a vote on a proposed compromise between the government's version of the bill and some Lords amendments on 31 January by a single vote. An amendment, not the bill (source).

Of the UK, Polly writes:

the very small number of religious practitioners in this most secular of nations.

Social Trends 36, on page 200, says this:

Attendance at religious services varies across Europe. Figure 13.19 shows the percentage of individuals who attended a religious service irrespective of faith at least once a month for the EU nations surveyed. In 2002 the highest attendance was by people resident in Poland (75 per cent) and the lowest by people of Denmark (9 per cent). The countries with the highest rates of attendance all followed the Catholic or Orthodox religion, while the Protestant Scandinavian countries recorded the lowest rates. The United Kingdom is placed 13th with 19 per cent of residents attending religious services at least once a month.

Not even in Europe is the UK the "most secular of nations".

SATURDAY, JULY 01, 2006

Unsure conclusion

A delayed post about yesterday's column -- the result of a late flight and a heavy schedule. Others have already pointed out that:

Remember, before Labour there was no childcare, no nursery education and no Sure Start to help young families

is of course twaddle, and that the evidence on Head Start is ambiguous (with a source, unlike, of course, Polly).

It is interesting that when writing about the research into the success of Sure Start, which produced a result which Polly didn't like, she writes:

Another batch will be out soon, unless some wise minister reconfigures it to measure only what can be measured.

When you have the courage to lecture this particular government on how to fix research to produce the desired as opposed to truthful answer, then you've left any pretense at accuracy behind.

So others have fact-checked the big stuff -- here's a mere crumb. Polly writes:

At prime minister's questions this week, Margaret Moran stepped in to urge him "to join me in congratulating staff" at the 11th Sure Start to open in her Luton constituency. It obliged him to sing its praises for once.

[emphasis added]

Compare this to Hansard:

Q7. [80673] Margaret Moran (Luton, South) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend aware that one of my official engagements yesterday was the opening of the 11th children's centre in my constituency, at a school, Dallow junior, which has received over £2 million of additional investment for new facilities? Will he join me in congratulating the staff involved in that achievement, and does he agree that it is another example of this Government tackling child poverty, which doubled under the Conservative party?

[emphasis added]

Children Centre is not synonymous with Sure Start -- it is just one of the Sure Start's mechanisms. There is also, for example, the Early Excellence Centre. There's one at Pastures Way Nursery in Luton, for example (source).

Doubtless this will strike many as pedantry -- this one little inaccuracy doesn't alter the broad thrust of the argument. However, if she can't really do the simple stuff like summarising Hansard correctly, it is harder to take seriously the policy recommendations, the reporting of anecdotes that she relies on so heavily, and, of course, the ever-present criticism of others for inaccuracy and relying on anecdote.

TUESDAY, JULY 04, 2006

Eh, quality?

In today's column, Polly Toynbee asks for an:

open discussion about the danger of infinite inequality escalation.

And she probably is looking for something more sophisticated than "it's OK, it is by definition finite." So let's get into the facts. Polly writes:

In personal property and liquid assets, the top 10% owns half of everything. The bottom 50% of the population owns just 6%. Count liquid assets alone, and the top 1% owns 63% while the bottom half owns just 1%. And this wealth inequality is growing fast, year on year.

Read that, and you might be surprised to learn that in 1976, the most wealthy 1% owned 21% of marketable wealth, and that in 2003 that figure was, er, 21%. In 1976, what the Inland Revenue refer to as the "most" wealthy 50% owned 92% of marketable wealth, and in 2003 that figure was 93% (source: Inland Revenue).

This is not fast growth -- in fact both figures are in decline from their peak in round about 2000.

It is true that inequality in what the Inland Revenue calls "Marketable wealth less value of dwellings" (source as above) has increased -- though it is hard to reconcile with the figures Polly cites for "liquid assets". Strip

housing out of the wealth figures and the most wealthy 1% own 34% (and not 63%). This is indeed up from 1976 (29%) but down from its peak in 2002. The more wealthy 50% did indeed own 99%, up from 88% in 1976.

So, if overall wealth inequality is unchanged (and not infinitely escalating) but the inequality of ownership of assets less housing is getting more unequal, this must mean that inequality of housing wealth must be decreasing.

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I also have a little trouble with this statement:

nearly 70% own their own homes

Nearly 70% of what? Surely not people. Adults? Possibly. Parents? Well, maybe. It is difficult to tell from the context. According to the national statistics website:

70% of GB dwellings are owner-occupied

Which is quite a different proposition, given that there are about 2.4 people per household (source: follow the links here).

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Compare the headline:

Cameron's set has no clue what middle England earns

And this statement of Polly's:

Do they know the median (middle England) salary is just £21,000?

Which rather raises the old conundrum about whether it is possible to know something that is wrong. According to the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings:

Median annual earnings for full-time employees for the 2004-05 tax year stood at £22,900

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UPDATE: Much of what Polly writes about today, as if it were current, is in fact a couple of months out-of-date now. So, for example:

George Osborne astonishingly claims that this modest tax change is "a wake-up call to middle England"

or

The Law Society had the effrontery to warn that this trust tax means 10m wills must be redrawn at a cost of £2.5bn. One insurance company said 4.5m life-assurance policies would need redrawing.

actually date from at least two months ago (source), before the government amended its proposals in June

(source). The changes tightened the scope of the proposals, thereby excluding many of the people who were so upset about the original proposals. To claim that they are concerned about proposals which have been specifically tightened in order to reflect their concerns is at best inaccurate *précis*.

FRIDAY, JULY 07, 2006

Hard figures

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

The Work Foundation points to these hard figures: in 1980 top directors in FTSE companies were paid 10 times the average worker in their companies. By 1990 the gap had multiplied to 31.5 times. And by 2002 the top dogs were paid an enormous 75.7 times more than their average employee. It is a statistical and social impossibility to pretend that we can really abolish child poverty in a society shaped like that.

It has not been easy trying to find the source of these figures (the Work Foundation merely "points" to them). The best I can do is an article called "Corporate governance and disappointment" in the *Review of International Political Economy* 11:4 October 2004. I haven't found it on the web freely available, but you can buy a copy here.

From this, we learn that it is not all FTSE companies, it is FTSE-100 companies. The data refer to the highest-paid individual director in each of the FTSE-100 companies. And it is not "the average worker in their companies", rather it is the average of "full-time manual employees in the UK." [emphasis added, source is the article I mentioned above].

Now, the average of all manual workers pay is different from the average pay of people working in a FTSE-100 company, as I am sure the employees of, say, 3i or Barclays or Schroders will be able to confirm.

When Polly called these "hard figures", I initially assumed she meant tough or rigorous, rather than difficult to get right.

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Even more interesting, though, is the 'why can't we be more like Sweden?' meme. In the paragraph directly after the authors of "Corporate governance and disappointment" introduce the figures which Polly makes a half-hearted attempt at citing, they say:

The US/UK differences are interesting but it is a mistake to make too much of them or to assume that by the late 1990s large payouts to executives were limited to Anglo-Saxon, stock market-based economies... As Messier at Vivendi or Barnevik at ABB demonstrate, greed knows no boundaries and consequently some of the most interesting examples of excessive compensation

have arisen in the most unlikely places. As Business Week (19 May 2003) observed of the Swedish/Swiss ABB, 'for a staid engineering company, they sure know how to make a golden parachute'.

Or could it be that there is scant causal link between directors' pay and child poverty?

TUESDAY, JULY 11, 2006

Let me count the ways

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

The Audit Commission estimates that £42,000 on effective early interventions in children's lives from birth to adolescence spares £153,000 in incarceration.

There are a number of problems with this sentence, and here is a guide to them:

The Audit Commission estimates(1) that £42,000 on effective early interventions in children's(2) lives from birth to adolescence spares(3) £153,000(4) in incarceration(5).

(1) It should actually be "estimated", not "estimates". When Polly first wrote about this back in March 2004, she actually had the good grace to use the past tense of "estimated". Now, over two years later, writing about exactly the same thing, we've suddenly switched to the present tense. Eh?

Oh, and if you doubt that it is the same thing, here is a sentence from her 2004 article [emphasis added]:

*The commission **estimated** that spending £42,000 on early interventions from birth through adolescence would spare £153,000 on subsequent incarceration.*

It is eerily familiar, isn't it? Apart from the altered tense...

(2) "Children's lives". Guess the sample size on which this broad generalisation is based. No, go on, guess. It is one. One! And hardly a representative one either. If you read the original research and their description of James (name has been changed), you'll see that:

- James is 15.
- He lives in his mother's house; however, she is rarely there.
- His older step-sister is also living there. She is a known drug user with previous convictions.
- His father occasionally visits and is violent and disruptive when he does.
- James has been excluded from special school.

- He is not receiving any alternative educational provision.
- He was ten when he received his first caution.
- He is currently serving his second custodial sentence.

I would hesitate to draw broad conclusions about "children's lives" based on one example, and on this one in particular. And the Audit Commission did not try to. In fact, they speculated about the benefits of spending on early intervention in a particular child's life.

3) The word "saves" here suggests that spending the £42,243 would automatically save the £153,687. Of course that is not guaranteed on the basis of a counter-factual involving one person. Which is why in their research the Audit Commission uses phrases like:

*"**assuming** crime route is avoided" [emphasis added]*

"It is not possible to accurately estimate the costs of a young person's involvement in crime and the impact on the lives of themselves and others."

*"Had the services been available, James **might** have benefited from family support, pre-school education, anger management, learning support and mentoring." [emphasis added]*

This is not to say that early intervention programmes don't work, but rather that the claim that they can save so much is pure conjecture.

(4) The actual figure is £153,687, so even with rounding this should be £154,000.

(5) No. Look at the original research. The £153,687 does not refer to incarceration alone. It includes a special education needs assessment by the LEA, compiling an education 'package', social services undertaking a family assessment, and so on.

THURSDAY, JULY 13, 2006

Recidivism

A little bit more on Tuesday's Polly Toynbee column. As ever, actually taking the time to go back and read the source material has cast her gift for inaccurate *précis* into sharp relief. Take this quote from her column:

Crime Concern delivers many of those designed to draw in the children regarded as at highest risk of offending. On a Rochdale estate, it achieves a 70% fall in calls to the police complaining about young people. It cost £350,000 - but researchers estimate it saves £665,000.

The £350,000 vs. £665,000 comparison comes from an evaluation of the Community Merit Awards (CMA) programme, commissioned by the Youth Justice Board. The figures do not refer to Rochdale, but to all CMA programmes (see p.13 of the report referenced above), and the efforts in Rochdale include a lot more than just the CMA, as this quote from page 12 of the report illustrates:

The Langley YIP is engaged in a number of other schemes, so it is difficult to give all the credit to the CMA

In other words, the "It" in "It cost £350,000 - but researchers estimate it saves £665,000" does not refer to anything mentioned previously in the column.

As for Polly's "[o]n a Rochdale estate, it achieves a 70% fall in calls to the police complaining about young people", the report is a little more nuanced:

For example, the positive view of the young people provided by wardens in Langley, Rochdale was backed up by the estate's housing manager. He stated that, at a recent borough-wide meeting to discuss vandalism and anti-social behaviour, his was the only estate where these issues were not seen as a problem. He also estimated that calls regarding young people being a nuisance had fallen by 70% during the CMA scheme.

In other words, an estimate of calls (not necessarily to the police) by the estate's housing manager. For an actual figure, I commend to you the Middleton Guardian's story "‘It must be YIP’ as youth crime halves", which says:

Between April and June youth nuisance calls have fallen by 41 per cent, with criminal damage down by 60 per cent. Areas not covered by the project have not reflected the reduction in trouble.

[emphasis added]

In other words, an excellent result, and one to be praised, but not the one Polly claims.

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She then goes on to say:

The youth inclusion programme identifies the 50 children most likely to become offenders locally, achieving a 65% reduction in arrest rates

The 65% reduction in arrest rates among participants needs to be compared with a 44% reduction in the control group of "top 50" children most likely to become offenders who *weren't* included in the program. On page 100 of *Evaluation of the Youth Inclusion Programme*, for example, comes this quote:

There was also a decrease in the levels of offending for the top 50 who were not engaged by the projects. However, the change was substantially lower than for those engaged, at 44% compared to 65% for those that were engaged

Again, a 21% reduction is a laudable result, but not the one claimed.

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Polly also writes:

Home Office research shows that every 15% increase in incarceration only prevents 1% of crime.

Of course it doesn't. Take, for example, page 130 of the 2000 *Halliday Report - 'Making Punishments Work: A Review of the Sentencing Framework for England & Wales'* which says:

Home Office modelling suggests that the prison population needs to increase by around 15% to result in a short-term reduction of crime of just 1%, assuming that the extra prisoners would have committed 13 recorded offences per year, if at liberty.

Now, these figures only try to calculate the number of crimes that would have been committed by the new prisoners, or to quote Halliday:

These figures represent the avoidance of crimes, arising from just imprisoning a person. They do no [sic] estimate the effect on the propensity to commit crime after their period of imprisonment or the deterrent effect on others.
[emphasis added]

And how about the assumption that "extra prisoners would have committed 13 recorded offences per year, if at liberty"? Well, Halliday gives this as a basis:

A survey of self reported offending among males received into prison under sentence in early 2000, suggests that they commit offences at around 140 per year in the period at liberty, before they were imprisoned.

[From the footnotes] It is estimated that the self reported offending figure of 140 is equivalent to about 13 recorded offences per year

[Back to the main text] There are substantial differences in the extent of drug related offending, ranging from 22 offences per person per year for those not taking any drugs to 257 for those who take drugs and admit to their drug taking being a problem.

Or, in other words, you can be more selective about whom you incarcerate. To quote Halliday again:

A 1% reduction in recorded crime can be achieved by targeting particular groups, but with a smaller overall increase in the prison population. For example, by increasing by 16% the prison population of persons who admit to taking a drug and to their drug taking being a problem. This is equivalent to a 7% increase in the overall prison population.

Or a 15% increase could achieve about a 2% reduction. So it is not true that "every 15% increase in incarceration only prevents 1% of crime." [emphasis added]

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The poor "every 15% increase in incarceration only prevents 1% of crime" citation is used as evidence for this sentence:

Prison is swallowing up the cash that might stop crime - and it doesn't work.

Now, the prison population is about 76,266 (source here -- not particularly up-to-date, but good enough for a rough and ready calculation). The research Halliday cited claimed that each prisoner would have committed or taken part in about 140 offences a year if at liberty, thus preventing 10.6m offences from occurring. The

budget for the prison service is about £2.8bn (£2,591m of current and £209m of capital expenditures.

Source: *Home Office Departmental Report 2004-05*, p.124-5), which means it costs about £264 per offence prevented.

Separately, the Home Office has estimated that the average cost of a crime to society is about £2,000 (on page 4 of Home Office Research Study 217: *The economic and social costs of crime*, they talk about "16 million crimes were estimated to be committed in this category each year, at a total cost of around £32 billion." Note that this is for crimes against individuals and households only). This estimate includes the costs of the Criminal Justice System, so we'll strip these out to avoid double-counting. These amount to about 20% (see p.55 -- note this is for the entire CJS, not just the prison service, so we are being conservative in our estimates here), so say the average cost per crime is £1,600.

Now, this is a back of the envelope calculation, and certainly not rigorous to make any policy recommendations as a result (e.g. it is not clear that all 140 offences would not occur, as some of them were committed with other people), but it is not immediately apparent that "[p]rison is swallowing up the cash that might stop crime" -- it looks like it is spending cash that does stop crime -- £264 per crime prevented, which would have cost £1,600 had it occurred.

FRIDAY, JULY 14, 2006

Fun ding-dong

In today's column, Polly Toynbee says:

Party fundraising did for Chancellor Kohl, the man who united East and West Germany at great political and financial risk

Actually, the scandal broke in 1999, over a year after he was 'done for'. He lost a general election in 1998, when the issue wasn't at all current.

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Polly also says of the Tories' proposed cap on donations of £50,000 that:

The unions this week gave indignant evidence that the cap would cut their annual contribution to Labour from £8m to £800,000.

Actually, these figures refer only to affiliation fees and not the total contribution, as this article in the *Guardian* makes clear:

The proposals would mean the unions, Labour's chief source of funding, would only be able to provide £800,000 annually instead of the present £8m annually in affiliation fees alone.
[emphasis added]

Indeed, a bit of digging on the part Electoral Commission's website dedicated to funding (here) shows that in 2005, unions gave the Labour Party £11.8m in cash alone, of which £2.8m was in donations below the proposed cap of £50,000 (though some of these may be multiple donations from the same union).

TUESDAY, JULY 18, 2006

Still unclear

Today's Polly Toynbee column says:

The eyes of would-be nuclear builders, meanwhile, are on Areva, the French government-subsidised company building in Finland the first new nuclear station anywhere in decades.

It might be instructive to compare that with this, from a column in the *Guardian* from August 2004:

Nuclear has, however, found an important niche market in Asia. Of 27 stations now under construction worldwide, 16 are in China, India, Japan and South Korea. China and India both intend at least to quadruple their nuclear output and have started nine new power plants in the past four years and have 10 more under construction.

Ahem.

Worstall

July 20, 2006

Polly on Nuclear

Just a little factette from her most recent column:

The eyes of would-be nuclear builders, meanwhile, are on Areva, the French government-subsidised company building in Finland the first new nuclear station anywhere in decades.

A little factette from a Telegraph feature on uranium:

In addition to the 441 reactors currently operating, 27 are being built and a further 38 are planned globally.

Is there a difference between one and 27 in PollyWorld?

FRIDAY, JULY 21, 2006

She would bet on it

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

Cowardice often hides behind "globalisation" as an excuse for inertia. Often it is the Americans who puncture the convenient myth of the helpless nation-state. Here's the latest example: the US senate is about to outlaw online gambling by preventing credit cards and banks paying out to gaming sites... The US shows you can just ban the banks from paying any money to online gambling sites at home or abroad, so this lethal explosion can be stopped.

Actually, it is not clear that the US senate is about to outlaw online gambling. As this article in the *Washington Post* shows, there is disagreement among Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist's aides about whether this will happen before their August recess. And, of course, it actually needs to, er, pass the vote.

And it does not show that "you can just ban the banks from paying any money to online gambling sites at home or abroad". There are rules governing trade (that pesky "globalisation" stuff). Appeals have already been lodged with the WTO, and the US does not have a 100% record with the WTO over gambling legislation.

It is also possible that this episode will show that you *can't* just ban banks from paying out to online gambling sites at home or abroad.

And, of course, it is still too early to say what the effect of the legislation will be (if it does get passed, and it survives challenges by the WTO, that is). It may, or may not, stop this "lethal explosion".

For someone who condemns gambling, she's taking a heck of a punt.

Worstall

July 21, 2006

Pollyanna

Polly Toynbee really is so predictable. Me, yesterday:

This will of course, as previous such studies have been, seized upon by various lefties (who wants to make a bet on it turning up in a Polly Toynbee column?) as evidence that we must have more income redistribution.

Polly today:

Cowardice stops Labour talking about gross inequality and the harm it does. Inequality is not only the root cause of crime, but yet another report shows how inequality can also cause early death. It's not diet or ignorance that kills the poor, but low ranking in the pecking order.

Further:

Cowardice often hides behind "globalisation" as an excuse for inertia. Often it is the Americans who puncture the convenient myth of the helpless nation-state. Here's the latest example: the US senate is about to outlaw online gambling by preventing credit cards and banks paying out to gaming sites. But Labour uses "unstoppable" online gambling as an excuse for many more slot-machine dominated casinos here, to tempt gambling back on-shore within British regulation and taxation. The US shows you can just ban the banks from paying any money to online gambling sites at home or abroad, so this lethal explosion can be stopped.

Such faith in the law! We'll ban something and it will stop happening! Polly dear, haven't you noticed that online gambling is already illegal in the US? Have you not seen in the papers that a Briton is currently in jail in Dallas on a charge about this? Have you not got the gumption to see that while it is already illegal millions upon millions of people are still doing it? "Make it illegal!" doesn't actually work all of the time.

Cowardice has marked Labour's feeble response to climate change. Ken Livingstone shows how

easily it can be done, his congestion charge defying every new Labour political rule.

Congestion charge? Climate change? What are you wibbling about woman? The congestion charge is a form of road pricing designed to cut congestion. There's a clue in there somewhere, in the name of the tax itself. Congestion. And, if I might remind you, it's precisely sod all to do with New Labour, the left or communitarian politics. You do know who was the intellectual originator, don't you?

Curiously, Sir Alan Walters, Mrs T's personal economic adviser, was one of the early pioneers of the theory underpinning road pricing to charge for congestion: Track Costs and Motor Taxation, Journal of Industrial Economics (1954), The Theory and Measurement of Private and Social Cost of Highway Congestion, Econometrica (1961), and The Economics of Road User Charges (John Hopkins University Press, 1969)
<http://www.geog.ox.ac.uk/staff/gsantos-files/etc.pdf>

Obviously a new intern in the office today.

Update: Factchecking Pollyanna:

For someone who condemns gambling, she's taking a heck of a punt.

SATURDAY, JULY 29, 2006

Better or Worse? p.54

With no columns in the *Guardian* this week, there has been little Polly Toynbee output to factcheck. So I turn once again to *Better or Worse? Has Labour Delivered?*, the book Polly co-wrote with David Walker. The challenge is to open it to a random page, and try to find a factual inaccuracy.

On page 54 (my edition is a Bloomsbury paperback), Polly writes:

In 2003 the child of a father in the lowest social classes was twice as likely to die within a year of birth, five times more likely to die in a road traffic accident and fifteen times more likely to die in a house fire than those in the highest social class.

The sentence bears a truly striking resemblance to one from page 9 of a 2004 report from the Institute for Public Policy Research, written by Will Paxton and Mike Dixon:

The list of disadvantages which are correlated with poverty is long, but to give just a few examples: in 2003, children of fathers in the lowest social class were twice as likely to die within one year of birth (ONS 2001), five times more likely to die in a traffic accident and 15 times more likely to die in a house fire than those from the highest social class (DoH 2003).

As I say, the similarities are startling, and for those interested in this sort of thing, the IPPR report is dated 2004; and Polly's book is dated 2005. I'm going to assume it is Polly who was handy with the copy 'n' paste. But the differences are striking too -- for example, I'd always assumed the absence of sources from Polly's material was just laziness, as opposed to deliberate suppression.

And, as ever, going to the original sources is revealing.

The figure about children from social class V being twice as likely to die within one year of birth than those from social class I is taken from an ONS report called *Childhood, infant and perinatal Mortality statistics - Review of the Registrar General on deaths in England and Wales, 2001* which was published in 2003, but actually refers to 2001.

By the time the 2003 figures had come out in 2005 (pdf link here -- again see Table 20), the ONS had moved from a five-class categorisation of social class to an nine-class one (counting 1.1 and 1.2 as two separate classes). As a result, the chances of dying before one in the top social class (1.1) was 0.32%, and the equivalent chance in the bottom social class (8) was 4%. A tenfold difference and not a twofold one.

As for the figure about dying in traffic accidents and in house fires, the report that Paxton and Dixon cite, *Tackling health inequalities - 2002 cross-cutting review*, was actually published on 19 November 2002, according to the page on the Department of Health website from which it can be downloaded (here).

Therefore, the quality of its insights into causes of death in 2003 are likely to be limited. In fact, the closest it comes to sourcing its claim that "[r]esidential fire deaths for children are 15 times greater for children in social class V compared to those in social class I" is on page 48, where it makes clear that the data it is using cover 1989-92. Rather than 2003.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 08, 2006

New terms

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

He [Blair] has upped Britain's pledge in a tougher carbon trading regime for the second EU round. But since 1997 UK emissions are up 3%.

If you look at National Statistics' *Environmental Accounts Spring 2006*, and in particular table 2.3, you'll see that in 1997, the UK's total emissions of greenhouse gasses were 754,793 thousand tonnes, and in 2004 731,915 thousand tonnes.

A, ahem, fall of 3%.

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She also writes that:

We have the dirtiest cars and the most expensive public transport.

Compare that to this quote, from a Friends of the Earth press release:

*According to the RL Polk data, the UK has the fourth highest average emissions from new cars in the 15 member states covered by the agreement. The highest average emissions are in Sweden (193.7 g/km CO₂) and the lowest in Portugal (145.1 g/km CO₂). UK emissions are slightly lower than those in Germany (170.8 g/km CO₂) and substantially higher than those in France (151.9 g/km CO₂).
[emphasis added]*

FRIDAY, AUGUST 11, 2006

Allergic even to the word 'research'

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

The Institute for Public Policy Studies says migrants are profitable: for every £100 in taxes paid by the average British-born person, the average new immigrant pays £112. Migrants make up only 8.7% of the UK's population but pay 10.2% of its income tax.

I think she means the Institute for Public Policy *Research* -- their press release with these figures is here. I have often chided Polly for failing to source facts and figures she uses. It is encouraging to see her try to do so here, but it remains a case of high marks for effort; low marks for accuracy.

A recurring theme of Polly's piece is that migrants pull down wages. So, for example, she argues that:

Even if GDP grows, migration can make the rich richer and the poor poorer. London, where migration is greatest, also has the highest unemployment, especially among British-born ethnic minorities. Poor families in this most expensive city can't pay for childcare, and compete for jobs with single migrants willing to take less than a living wage. But the rich prosper: restaurants, cleaners and all other services are cheaper because wages are low.

The argument suffers a little, as the IPPR figures on tax make clear that migrants tend to earn *more* than the average British-born person, and not *less*. Indeed, the IPPR report behind the press release shows that in 2003/4, the average gross weekly earnings from main job of working-age migrants was £405.83, compared with £355.06 for someone born in the UK. To quote at length from page 7 of the IPPR report:

UK and foreign-born populations have slightly differing distributions of income. Immigrants are overrepresented at the upper end of the income spectrum. For example, some 4.7 per cent of the foreign-born working age population earn more than £1000 weekly compared to only 2.6 per cent of the UK-born. At the other end of the wage spectrum, where both immigrants and non-immigrants are more concentrated, there is a slight difference in the relative distribution. For example, at the very bottom end of the distribution, 12.8 per cent of UK-born earn less than £100 a week compared to 9.7 per cent of foreign-born. It is also worth mentioning that employment rates amongst immigrants are lower than those of non-immigrants (due in part to the fact that many foreign-born are students at British educational institutions)...

Worstall

August 11, 2006

Polly on Immigration!

Quite breathtaking today, really.

He said he wanted to limit immigration to balance "enhancing the economy of this country commensurate with our social stability". That is indeed the dilemma - more GDP v social justice for the low paid.

Social justice for the low paid. Yes, and who are the largest group of low paid people, people paid very much at the low end of the scale? Why, all those foreigners wanting to immigrate. So, if social justice is actually your bag you should therefore be in favour of immigration. It is increasing the pay of the low paid and thus aiding that social justice.

The only way that this could not be true is if, unlike I am sure a liberal internationalist like Polly, there is some way in which "not-Britons" are less valuable, less worthy of concern, than "Britons". If you did hold such views of course it is all entirely logical. You might even then go on to say that we owe no duty to those "not-Britons" in such things as foreign aid, climate change, war, famine and pestilence.

Either we are all human beings in this together, in which case purely nationalistic demarcations should play no part, or we are indeed nationalists and we should only consider our own. Which side of that argument you or I are on is not my point. Rather, that you cannot be on both sides at the same time.

Near-full employment should mean pay rises - but cheap imported labour helps keep it low. Studies purporting to prove immigration has had no such effect simply don't capture this invisible power.

The consensus opinion is roughly as Alex Tabarrok puts it here.

Immigrants do not take American jobs. The American economy can create as many jobs as there are workers willing to work so long as labor markets remain free, flexible and open to all workers on an equal basis.

Immigration in recent decades of low-skilled workers may have lowered the wages of domestic low-skilled workers, but the effect is likely to be small, with estimates of wage reductions for high-school dropouts ranging from eight percent to as little as zero percent.

As above, this is outweighed by the huge positive effect upon those who have immigrated.

Social democracy needs enough social cohesion to persuade people that everyone benefits when resources are more fairly distributed.

Oh, very much so. Which is why "We must be more like Sweden" is not really an appropriate political policy for the UK. We are hugely more diverse culturally and therefore do not have exactly that social cohesion necessary to make such a project work. We also attempt to make such things work on a national scale, in a centralized manner, which is really not how they do it there. Their version of State supplied health care is, for example, run by the counties, with taxes raised within an area paying for health care in that area.

Now, one thing that might make such a hugely more paternal (or matriarchal if you prefer) State work for us is localism. Devolve all of that welfare state stuff down to the level of the community and we might be willing to pay for more of it as we might indeed have enough social cohesion at that level to provide political support for it.

Or we might not of course, in which case the people, the bastards, will have spoken. But it might work, for one interesting little fact is that Sweden has a higher ratio of immigrants to population than the UK does.

Really. 5.4 % to 4%.

Just for laughs:

John Salt of University College London measures the pull factor: there is a precise correlation between the number of people migrating and the difference between wages at home and wages in their destination country.

That has to be the most obvious research result ever. You mean to say, shock horror, that economic migration is driven by economic factors? Ooooh, say it isn't so Missus!

Update: Chris Dillow points out that, according to the HOS model, immigration is near irrelevant. Trade has exactly the same effect on wages.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 15, 2006

Re-commissioning

Today's Polly Toynbee column has lots of broad assertions of opinion rather than poorly-researched facts. However, this sentence is particularly troubling:

A new Commission on Integration and Cohesion, launching this month, will be worthless unless its first recommendation is to end religious and ethnic segregation in schools.

The commission is anything but new. Charles Clarke announced it in September 2005 (source), at which time there was a lot of detail. It would have public meetings round the country, chaired by a government minister. A report was promised in July 2006. Clarke wrote to "faith leaders" to ask their opinions. The CRE published a response to the consultation in October 2005 (source). By May of 2006, however, a commenter on Comment is Free was wondering what had happened to it (source, comment 32002).

And now (well, in June 2006) it is re-launched (source). It may now have a chair, but new it is certainly not.

Worstall

August 15, 2006

Good Golly Polly!

Yes, yes, I know, I normally disagree with everything she writes, including the words and, or and the. There are parts I disagree with in this too, however, praise where it is due:

Every minister hotly denying this obvious truth sounds absurd - but makes the wrong point altogether. The point is that a democratically elected government's foreign policy can't be moulded by threats from murdering religious maniacs. There are 1,001 good reasons why we should never have supported, let alone joined, the war in Iraq. But the one truly bad reason would have been fear of terrorism.

Those signing the letter steer perilously close to suggesting the government had it coming. The Muslim leaders wrote: "The debacle of Iraq and now the failure to do more to secure an immediate end to the attacks on civilians in the Middle East not only increases the risk to ordinary people in that region, it is also ammunition to extremists who threaten us all." They urge the prime minister to "change our foreign policy to show the world that we value the lives of civilians wherever they live and whatever their religion. Such a move would make us safer." Maybe it would, but there can't be many, pro- or anti-war, who think sparing us from threats by God-blinded killers should be the number-one priority in foreign policy.

...

It goes with the selective amnesia that forgets about the Kosovo Muslims Blair and Clinton saved from genocide. It goes with a distorted memory of the Taliban as anything other than ruthless despots to their people (especially their women) and unprovoked originators of terror against the rest of the world. As for Iraq, invasion was dangerously misguided, but selective Islamic memory forgets that Saddam murdered Muslims.

...

Spot on. As she says, we can agree or disagree with any of the specific actions but to have not done any or all of them because medieval theocrats would threaten us is absurd.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 17, 2006

Polly maths

WARNING: *this post is lengthy and detailed, and does not relate to a recent column.*

Polly Toynbee appeared on Radio 4's *Any Questions* on the 14th July, 2006 (transcript). I would have blogged about it at the time, but I couldn't find the transcript immediately and I didn't want to rely on my memory to criticise. I did, however, stumble across the transcript on the web the other day, and discovered that she distorted as badly as I remembered. Take, for example, this exchange:

LAWSON ...The facts are these: That certainly there's been a great deal - there's been a great increase in carbon emissions over the past centenary as a result of mankind and carbon emissions - carbon - CO₂, carbon dioxide, is not a pollutant, it is what plants need to grow on, it is actually a life force like oxygen. The - but the nevertheless there has been a big increase. What has happened to the world's temperature so far - over the past 100 years - and this is not in dispute, this is accepted on all sides - the temperature of - the average temperature of the world has

increased by two thirds of one degree centigrade... Nevertheless, there's always a risk that carbon dioxide emissions may contribute more, they've contributed something to this two thirds of a degree and therefore it is sensible to take out an insurance policy and may be nuclear power is a sensible insurance policy to take out.

CLARKE Polly Toynbee.

TOYNBEE Well I find that very interesting I think Lord Lawson is one of the last of a very rare breed that perhaps we ought to be protecting. He is a climate change denier. And there are almost none of them left. I used to get loads of e-mails and loads of correspondence on this from various scientists all over the world and they have all shut up and gone away, except for Lord Lawson. There is virtually nobody and certainly no reputable scientist left and even George Bush has had to face up to the unpalatable truth that global warming is certainly happening and we are to blame.

So, Lawson says that there has been a rise in CO₂ emissions, says that there has been a rise in temperature and that the CO₂ emissions have "contributed something to this two thirds of a degree", and he is branded a "climate change denier"? What? It almost feels like a prepared rant rather than a reply to what Lawson actually said.

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But that's not what I wanted to write about. On *Any Questions*, Polly made the following claim:

[T]he figures show that if you take a very clever very poor child at the age of 22 months and you compare them with a very dim but well off child at 22 months, there they are at opposite ends of the spectrum, by the time they're six years old they will have crossed over and their trajectories will go in opposite directions.

It was a claim which intrigued me at the time, and I was reminded of it when I re-read the transcript. So I did a little bit of digging. Polly wrote this on 22 January, 2003:

Take babies tested for attainment at the age of 22 months: at one end of the scale is a very bright child from a poor home and at the other end is a dim but rich baby. At just under two years old, the bright child scores 85 points on the scale while the dim one scores only 10. But the two children are already on a steep trajectory in the opposite directions, the poor/bright one travelling fast downwards, the rich/dim one moving up, as their social backgrounds counteract their inborn abilities.

By the time they hit nursery school, at the age of three, they have nearly converged - (poor/bright scores only 55 now, while dim/rich has risen up to 45). At the age of six the children's lines cross, and then diverge for ever more as they head off into opposite futures. Anything that happens by the time they reach school is only remedial, seeking to pull up the poor child's scores to where it began.

On 3 June, 2003, she wrote this (and some of this may seem familiar):

Take babies tested for attainment at the age of 22 months: at one end of the scale is a very bright child from a poor home and at the other end is a dim but rich baby. At just under two years old, the bright child scores 85 points on the scale while the dim one scores only 10. But the two children are already on a steep trajectory in opposite directions: the poor/bright one travelling fast

downwards; the rich/dim one moving up, as their social backgrounds counteract their inborn abilities. By the time they hit nursery school aged three, they have nearly converged - poor/bright scores only 55 now, while dim/rich has risen to 45. At the age of six the children's lines cross, and then diverge for ever more as they head off into opposite futures.

So anything that happens by the time they reach school is only remedial, seeking to pull up the poor child's scores to where it began.

On 3 September, 2003, worried that her readers may still not have tired of the wonders of the copy-and-paste function of her word processor, she writes:

He [David Bell, chief inspector of schools] quotes influential research from Dr Leon Feinstein of the LSE, whose findings electrified the education ministers. Testing babies for attainment at the age of 22 months, their progress was followed according to social class. It found very bright children from poor homes and dim but rich babies at the other end of the scale were already on a steep trajectory in the opposite directions, the poor/bright travelling fast downwards, the rich/dim moving up. By nursery school at three, they have nearly converged. At the age of six, the children's lines cross and then diverge for evermore as they head off into opposite futures.

So the rest of school is just remedial to repair early damage already done.

We're given a bit of a respite until 2 April, 2004 when, the meme is shortened down to:

A baby's fate is virtually fixed at 22 months: school is too late.

These have all been from the *Guardian*, which at least has the merit of a voluntarily paying readership who can stop buying the paper if they tire of buying endlessly recycled prose. That is not true in the case of a pamphlet she wrote for the Mayor of London, where she wrote:

Take a very bright poor child at the top end of the ability scale and a very dim well-off child at the bottom end of the scale at the age of 22 months and test them again as they both reach nursery school at the age of three: the poor/bright child will have slipped far down the ability scale while the rich/dim kid will have risen up it. They are both on a steep trajectory in opposite directions, the bright/poor downwards, the dim/rich upwards. At the nursery school gates their scores converge. By the time they reach the age of six in primary school the children's lines cross, with the rich/dim heading on upwards and the poor/bright one falling back as they head off into opposite futures for ever more. Any schooling thereafter will only offer remedial help for the damage done to the poor child in the earliest years.

According to Ken Livingstone, this article cost about £7,000 -- and the tendering was not competitive. The next time Ken decides to spend tax money I contributed towards to copy and paste bits of old *Guardian* articles together, I will undercut £7,000 as a fee. But then again, I don't write things like:

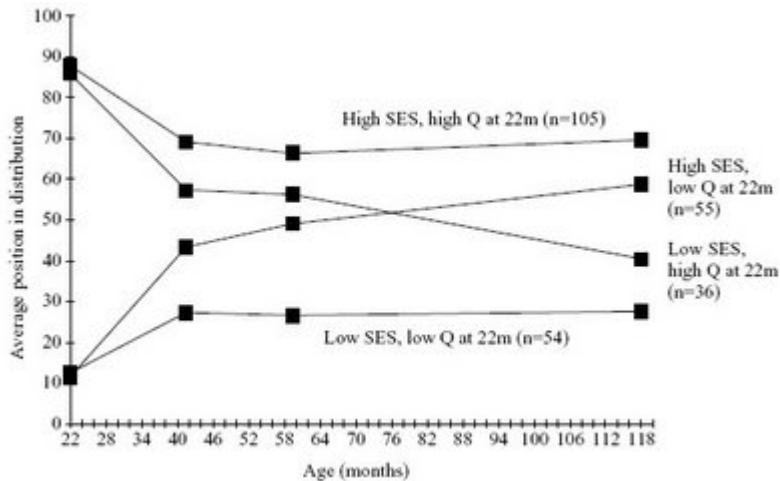
This week Ken Livingstone has shown how real bravery in the face of near-universal attack and predictions of disaster is winning through on London's congestion charge.

in a national newspaper, so maybe my back doesn't need scratching quite as much as hers.

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But what of the actual research? Well, it is inaccurate *précis* of an article by Leon Feinstein published in the February 2003 issue of *Economica*, entitled: "Inequality in the Early Cognitive Development of British Children in the 1970 Cohort". I haven't found a free copy online, but it can be purchased through the Social Science Research Network (www.ssrn.com).

Here is figure 2 from the article, which is what Polly is trying to summarise:



Where "High SES" means that the child's parents had high socio-economic status (i.e. "father was professional/managerial and mother was similar or registered housewife") at the time of birth, "Low SES" means the parents had low socio-economic status (i.e. "father in semi-skilled or unskilled manual occupation and mother similar or housewife") and "Q at 22m" refers to the child's quartile in tests carried out at 22 months. "High Q", then, means that the child was in the top quarter of children tested at 22 months.

On the face of it, then, you can see why Toynbee characterises it the way she does -- it does appear to suggest that "rich/dim" kids do overtake "poor/bright" ones at between six and seven years (assuming the trend lines are indeed linear).

However, here are four big things that Polly does not tell you about the research.

ONE It is carried out on children born in 1970. That's right -- it is measuring what happened over thirty years ago.

TWO When she talks about dim and bright kids at 22 months, she doesn't tell you what is being measured. I will. [Here is the questionnaire \(pdf link, sorry\) that was used in the research.](#) Here are some of the things that were measured:

- Can he balance on one foot for one second?
- Can he jump in one place?
- Can he put on his pants?
- Can he draw a vertical line?

Now, I'm not for one second suggesting that these are not broadly reliable indicators of general development but to call a kid who cannot balance on one foot for one second at the age of 22 months "dim" is pretty hypocritical of someone who complains that failing the 11+ made her feel that:

I was judged on that day and I was found stupid. And I was very lucky, I was middle class for a start which meant that I was likely to get a leg up in life, unlike lots of children who were damned forever by that exam, quite unfairly and quite wrongly.

THREE Polly shortens the comparison of socio-economic status to "rich" versus "poor". In fact, it is not clear that it is the socio-economic status which is making the difference. In fact, Table 3 in the Feinstein article shows that the background variables at birth (parents' socio-economic status, parents' schooling, number of siblings, sex, and mother's age) account for only 25% of a child's ranking in tests carried out at 10 years of age.

Furthermore, socio-economic status is quite a small part of that. If you were born in 1970 and your father's socio-economic status was low (3, 4 or 5), this cost you -7.2 percentiles in your test score ranking at age ten. Having an older sibling would have cost you -8.9 percentiles and two older siblings would have cost you -13.9 percentiles.

In other words, having two older siblings damages your test score results at age ten almost twice as much as having a father of lower socio-economic status.

Oh, and the single biggest thing that makes a difference is having a mother with a degree. This boosts your test score results at the age of ten by +25.2 percentiles.

Why is this important? Well, let's not forget that Polly argues for specific policies and uses the "facts" that she cites to support these. In her article of 2 April, 2004, for example, she uses it to argue for an "increase in the top rate of tax", because poverty causes poor school results. That this might have been true thirty years ago, and that even then the explanatory power of parent's socio-economic status was relatively low is actually quite helpful context to allow us to judge the quality of her policy prescriptions.

FOUR Polly wrote that:

A baby's fate is virtually fixed at 22 months: school is too late.

No. Table 4 of Feinstein's article shows that of the children who were in the bottom quartile of test results at age 22 months, 32.3% went on to get A-levels or higher qualifications, compared to 43.3% from the top quartile. Doing badly in a test of jumping in one place aged 22 months is not tantamount to failure.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 19, 2006

A little trifle for the weekend

Polly Toynbee has been given awards and honorary degrees over the course of her career. I read a couple of the pieces celebrating these, including this when the Political Studies Association made her Political

Journalist of the Year for 2003, this when Loughborough University made her Honorary Graduan in 2004 and this when Essex University made her a Doctor of the University.

There at least two things that they all agree on. One is that her work has "detailed presentation of fact, with careful attention to accuracy" (PSA), is "informed" (Loughborough) and "invariably well-informed" (Essex). The second is that they all agree that she left the BBC in 1995.

How strange, then, to find her writing in 2003 that "I left the BBC 10 years ago".

TUESDAY, AUGUST 22, 2006

Mendacious figures? I'll give you mendacious figures.

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

This week City dealers' bonuses soared higher than ever, to £21bn, dwarfing the £3.3bn tax take from all their inheritances.

No. It's not just city dealers: "The ONS said the overall bonus figures cover the vast majority of Britain's companies, include [sic] bonuses to boardroom executives" says the, er, *Guardian* -- which also pegs the figure at £19bn. The £21bn figure comes from this *Evening Standard* article, which is forecasting future bonuses and not talking about past ones.

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Polly also writes:

Warren Buffett, giving away most of his £44bn, says: "A very rich person should leave his kids enough to do anything but not enough to do nothing."

Generous estimates of Buffet's (pre-donation) wealth do go as high as \$44bn (e.g. the sometimes excitable *Accra Daily Mail*), though this is still comfortably below Polly's figure. More conservative estimates have put it at around \$37bn (e.g. the, er, *Guardian*) or about £20bn. Not £44bn.

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Polly also writes:

Very few ever pay inheritance tax. Just 37,000 estates paid it last year, out of 600,000 deaths. Byers bandied about the mendacious figure of 1.5 million people now caught by it, arriving at this by crudely adding up the homes of the living worth over the £285,000 inheritance tax threshold

The casual lumping together of a flow figure (37,000 per year) and a stock figure (1.5m) is disingenuous at best. He also didn't talk about "people" but rather "properties", but that's a distraction. To see the relevance of the stock/flow issue, consider this. If homeowners are distributed evenly across the age range of, say, 30 to 70, and they all die at 70 (yes, yes, I know I am simplifying hugely). This would mean that every year, one fortieth of homeowners would die, thereby making one fortieth of the roughly 1.5m estates with homes valued over the tax threshold liable to the tax. One fortieth of 1.5m is about 37,500, i.e. not far off the actual

figure.

Now, I am not saying that the above figures are true -- I am ignoring a lot (e.g. age distribution, particularly for ownership of expensive properties may not be even, not everyone dies at 70, etc...) deliberately -- but they do show that to compare stock and flow data you do have to understand the difference.

Calling someone mendacious for citing facts which are actually true but merely hard for the intellectually incurious to understand is a little harsh.

Worstell

August 22, 2006

Polly on Taxation

Good lord, the old gel is getting confused:

Bill Rammell, the higher education minister and MP for hyper-marginal Harrow West,

As noted in the comments, actually for Harlow.

This week City dealers' bonuses soared higher than ever, to £21bn, dwarfing the £3.3bn tax take from all their inheritances.

Sorry, did we slaughter all the bankers this year so that their estates are subject to inheritance tax? You know, for this tax to be payable there's one event that has to happen: someone dying?

Inheritance tax is already weak. The late Roy Jenkins called it a voluntary tax paid by those who distrust their relatives more than they hate the Inland Revenue: most of the rich give away large sums before they die.

Yes, quite:

Meaning to plant a Blairist flag to keep middle England inside the New Labour coalition, he ended up rousing the powerful passion for social justice that resides in most Labour MPs. Warning that Tony Blair's departure (and electing Gordon Brown) could mean the loss of the south, he unexpectedly galvanised the party against the kind of Blairism that deliberately ignores obscene inequality.

That's why abolishing inheritance tax will have very little effect on "obscene inequality". Because the million and billionaires don't actually pay it.

The wise rich worry about leaving fortunes to their children. Warren Buffett, giving away most of his £44bn, says: "A very rich person should leave his kids enough to do anything but not enough to do nothing."

Well, actually, he put \$6.7 billion into the traditional form of family charitable trust that will feed his descendants for many generations to come. Free of any inheritance tax, in fact, in the future, that sum will be free of capital gains, income tax and anything else tax, so long as 5% is spent each year. That 5% can include charitable giving, of course, and it can also (and does and will) include paying his descendants to manage that money, the returns to which carry on rolling up tax free from here until doomsday. Oh yes, a wonderful example of eradicating "obscene inequality".

Very few ever pay inheritance tax. Just 37,000 estates paid it last year, out of 600,000 deaths. Byers banded about the mendacious figure of 1.5 million people now caught by it, arriving at this by crudely adding up the homes of the living worth over the £285,000 inheritance tax threshold (it rises to £325,000 next year). But by the time they die, most of these will have downsized their homes, spending much of it in retirement or giving it away to children.

Giving it away to children?

...most of the rich give away large sums before they die. If they survive for a magic seven years, they pay nothing. It loses the Treasury untold billions, and no one can explain why this seven-year loophole exists.

Polly wouldn't be saying that many people don't pay inheritance tax, so we needn't worry about it, because they take advantage of tax law loopholes that she would like to see closed is she? No, she can't really be saying that can she?

Social democratic Sweden recently abolished inheritance tax, but has a property tax instead.

I believe we have a property tax in the UK as well. Called Council Tax. What she means of course is a wealth tax (which Sweden does have at 1.4 % of assets, although the valuations of housing are pretty odd leading to gross undervaluations) but then apparently she's too ignorant to know the difference.

The Bow Group, a Tory thinktank, calls for a 1% levy on all property over £70,000, with a 38% flat

tax to simplify the whole system and make it more socially just at the bottom. Simpler flat taxes need not be regressive: the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has just published a report from the poverty researcher Donald Hirsch and the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which suggests a flat rate of 35% could lift many out of the poverty trap at the bottom.

What I think she's missed (certainly she has about the Bow Group, less sure about Rowntree and the IFS) is that this also involves the merging of the NI and income tax systems. It leads to a dramatic fall in taxation on higher incomes. She wouldn't like that. Also, as noted in the comments:

"(George Osborne) is the man who flirts with flat tax, the simplest tax of all - but also the most regressive, taking the least from the wealthiest."

Polly Toynbee 2nd June 2006

"The Bow Group, a Tory thinktank, calls for a 1% levy on all property over £70,000, with a 38% flat tax to simplify the whole system and make it more socially just at the bottom. Simpler flat taxes need not be regressive: the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has just published a report from the poverty researcher Donald Hirsch and the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which suggests a flat rate of 35% could lift many out of the poverty trap at the bottom."

Polly Toynbee Today

Still, perhaps we should thank heaven for small mercies. She has at least grasped the point that flat taxes can, dependent upon the personal allowance, be more progressive than the current system. As are, indeed, all the different variations being floated.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 25, 2006

What is happiness, really?

In today's column, Polly Toynbee tells us that:

it [Sweden] tops the international happiness league

Which international happiness league? Not this one, which asks about "life satisfaction", where it is Switzerland that tops the league table. Not this one, which is the proportion of people saying they are happy less the proportion who say they are unhappy, where it is Iceland which comes out on top. Blanchflower and Oswald's paper "Happiness and the Human Development Index: The Paradox of Australia" has Mexico in prime position.

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UPDATE: In the comments to the piece on Comment is Free, commenter Persian says:

Polly also repeats what seems to be one of her ideas fixes, namely that unlike other Europeans, Swedish women have a lot of children. From the Council of Europe's website -

Sweden's "roller-coaster" fertility rate has received international attention. In the 1980s fertility rates grew rapidly and reached 2.14 in 1990 – one of the highest fertility rates in Europe at the time. Since the early 1990s fertility is again declining rapidly. The economic recession, increased unemployment and and less generous family policies were contributing factors. In 1999 the total fertility rate reached an all time low of 1.5 and in 2002 the total fertility rate was 1.65.

So probably Polly's not updating her facts.

The link to the Council of Europe website is here.

I'm shocked. Is she really not updating her facts? Well, she also writes:

Nor was the "scandal" of a minister using her official credit card to buy a bar of chocolate - but she had to resign.

Gosh. You wouldn't think that actually happened in 1995 would you?

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UPDATE 2: The case of the "minister using her official credit card to buy a bar of chocolate", as Polly described it, gets more and more interesting. In a paper written by two academics at Lund University, called "Pack-hunt journalism – ruthless journalism as the norm in the media society" comes this description of the scandal:

After the Social Democrats' election victory in 1994 Mona Sahlin re-entered the Government on 7 October, this time as both Deputy Prime-Minister and Minister for Equality. Almost at once she began to use her official credit card for private purposes, first for three cash withdrawals, each of 2000 SEK, then for some clothes purchases and hiring a car, and then again further cash withdrawals. After officials had spoken to her about the matter she promised to put the card away, but she didn't pay off the outstanding debt, which totalled 9,855 SEK. On 28 December 1994 she again used the card to pay a bill of 9,187 SEK for a hired car. It was not until 6 February that she paid the original 9,855 SEK, while the car-hire bill remained unpaid, and more cash withdrawals were made (Aftonbladet 1995).

On 7 October 1995 Expressen revealed her cash withdrawals. In her defence Sahlin claimed that she had mixed up her cards. The following day she changed her story and instead claimed that it was an advance of salary. The then Prime Minister, Ingvar Carlsson, commented by noting that she had paid the money she owed. Not until 10 October did Sahlin pay the car-hire bill that had been outstanding since 1994. On 12 October it was revealed that she was still using the card, despite her promises not to use it for private purposes (Aftonbladet 1995). On the following four days all the Swedish daily and evening papers, as well as the radio and TV channels were filled to the brim with revelations about Sahlin's various expenses and payment difficulties, including among other things that she had not paid a school bill on time. The leader columns of the Social Democratic papers criticised her, saying that she had damaged the Party.

On 16 October 1995 Mona Sahlin held a press conference [...] She made a long statement in which she accused the journalists of a witch-hunt against her. "You take pictures through the kitchen window and say she is hiding indoors [...] You pry into the bedrooms with your tele-lenses. I feel dirty but I wonder how you feel, you who have been part of what I am describing [...]" (Sahlin 1996: 295). [...]

At the same time the Public Prosecutor was making preliminary enquiries. And in the speculations about who should succeed Ingvar Carlsson, Mona Sahlin became more and more of an outsider. To get as far away as possible from all this fuss, she booked a holiday for herself and her family. In Mauritius. To be able to keep in touch with the Ministry, she took her secretary with her – whose stay was paid from public funds. When she came home her holiday destination was the main subject in all the headlines. In its leader on 6 November the evening paper Expressen wrote:

"The journey to Mauritius was for many yet another proof that the political classes now consider themselves above the people they represent. Not only is Sahlin behindhand in paying her bills at the play-school, while supplementing her pay with public funds, but she goes off to the millionaires' island too. And she even has the cheek to take her secretary with her at the tax-payers' expense."

On 10 November the pressure became too much and Mona Sahlin resigned. The Public Prosecutor then dropped his enquiry and she decided to give a first press conference. Erik Fichtelius was at the microphone. He asked whether she had now paid all her play-school bills. Yes, I think so, she replied. She thought wrong. Fichtelius said he had just checked up, and it seemed that there was still an unpaid school bill, and a reminder was on its way. Once again other media started to investigate, but eventually the media coverage died down. She returned to Government three years later and her political career seemed to pick up speed again. There the journalistic pack-hunt against Mona Sahlin might have ended. But history repeats itself.

In November 1999 it emerged that Mona Sahlin had received 98 parking-tickets in two years, of which 32 had gone to the public Debt Collector. Once again the pack-hunt set off. Scarcely a year later, in August 2000, came the next blow – the revelation that her file had been noted because she was three months late in paying a supplementary tax bill of 40,000 SEK. For Sahlin, who had launched a Social Democratic campaign under the motto "It's great to pay tax [sic]!", this was yet another reminder that she didn't practise what she preached. In case she had forgotten it, the media were only too ready to refresh her memory. In 2002 came the next media posse, when it was discovered that a double ban had been put on Sahlin's Volvo, because she had neither put it in for its MOT test nor paid the annual vehicle tax (Molin 2002). In contrast to the first pack-hunt, however, none of the subsequent ones led to her resignation.

This was not about a chocolate bar, however much Mona Sahlin would like it to be. From the same paper referenced above comes this quote:

She [Mona Sahlin] explained at a press conference long after the matter had been discovered that she had occasionally bought a Toblerone on her official credit card.

I think this is known as "playing it down". It's a shame to see the gullible buying the line.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 29, 2006

How can you only have another year of a perpetual attack?

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes that:

Tipping the boat on one side, Stephen Byers' latest assault in the Times from the Blairite extreme is outrageously provocative, demanding to cement the future long after the leader has

gone. [...] Every word Byers wrote implied that Brown is some kind of old Labour warhorse waiting to hoist the red flag in Downing Street - even though Brown has already fixed the comprehensive spending review to fall as a percentage of GDP, which hardly signals profligacy or taxing the rich until the pips squeak.

I am puzzled by the reference to the "fixed" CSR. Gordon Brown certainly expressed in his budget an intention to limit growth in public expenditure to 1.9% in real terms, below the expected rate of growth in GDP (see, for example, here), but this is not the same as "fixing" the CSR. Why, only last week we were being told that it was not yet set and that there would be debates up and down the country precisely on taxation and expenditure:

*The comprehensive spending review **will set** Labour's future in cement for the next election. Before next July's deadline, Gordon Brown promises a roadshow up and down the country to expound and debate the choices in taxing and spending.
[emphasis added]*

Wrote, er, Polly Toynbee last week.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 01, 2006

Les faits ne sont pas des jeux...

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

But the US Senate has proved internet gambling can be banned, by refusing to license US companies and by banning banks and credit card companies from paying gaming sites anywhere in the world.

When she last wrote about this, back on 21 July, she was merely predicting that the "US senate is about to outlaw online gambling by preventing credit cards and banks paying out to gaming sites". At the time, I noted that it was ironic that she was prepared to bet that this would occur in the context of a column decrying gambling.

Despite Polly's now stronger statement, no longer merely predicting but actually stating that it has happened, the US Senate have still not passed the bill. According to GovTrack.US, the House passed the bill by 317-93 on 11 July 2006, but the Senate has yet to vote on it.

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She also writes:

Does it have to be this way? No. Norway has just banned all slot machines.

No. In actual fact, the government has said it will no longer grant any new licences to slot machines as they expire, so that the country will be slot machine free by 1 July 2007 at the latest. This is not a ban, and the action is subject to legal challenge.

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Polly also says:

The internet has seen gambling revenues mushroom from £7bn in 2001 to £50bn just four years later.

Now, there are two ways of measuring expenditure on gambling. One is adding up the value of each bet placed, and the other is to subtract the winnings. Let's imagine I go out for a night's betting with £100 in my pocket. I bet all £100 on my first bet, win and get £150 back. I bet all £150 again, and get £250 back. On my third bet I bet all £250 and lose it all. I then go home.

Under option (a), total expenditure is £500 (i.e. all bets placed). Under option (b), the total is only £100 -- the difference between my stakes (£500) and my total winnings (£400). Both are valid and have their merits. Which does Polly mean?

Well, if we assume option (a), table 12.10 in the 2006 *Annual Abstract of Statistics* shows that in 2001/2, expenditure on the national lottery was £5bn, £1bn was spent on bingo and £10bn on off-course betting (including the dread internet). There is some minor expenditure on football pools as well. That will be £16bn in total -- admittedly in 2003/4 prices, but clearly not the figure Polly means.

If we assume option (b), we need look no further than Mr Caborn's answer to Mr Robertson on 24 July, reported here in Hansard. Using this methodology, expenditure in 2001/2 was indeed £7bn, but in 2005/6 it was only £10bn.

Now, we can reproduce the £7bn to £50bn figure -- roughly, roughly -- but only if you take the 2001 figure using the lower number, i.e. option (b) and the higher figure for 2005, i.e. option (a).

But that would be a little misleading.

Worstall

September 01, 2006

Factchecking Polly

Fortunately, Factchecking Pollyanna is already up and has done this one.

I'd add just one further point:

But the US Senate has proved internet gambling can be banned, by refusing to license US companies and by banning banks and credit card companies from paying gaming sites anywhere in the world. Like porn, easy-access gambling is a political choice, not an inevitable destiny.

The question is not whether the US Senate bans such things (the bill hasn't passed yet and it's also worth noting that the US Senate does not rule the US. It also has to pass the House of Representatives and get signed by the President) but whether such a ban actually stops online gambling.

The evidence upon that is far more mixed. Remember, they actually changed the Constitution once to ban alcohol. That did not, quite famously, stop people from drinking alcohol.

Update. Polly also talks about violent porn in her column, leading to this perfect comment:

AntonioV

September 1, 2006 10:09 AM

WHY DO WE BRITS HAVE TO GO FOR EXTREME PORN? WHY CAN'T WE ENJOY OUR PORN IN A REASONABLE MEASURED WAY, THE WAY CONTINENTALS DO, WITH A GOOD MEAL?

Ho hum

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

...the NHS budget for tackling teen pregnancy has just been slashed from £18m to £5m.

Hmm. The Teenage Pregnancy Unit is, of course, part of the DfES and not the NHS.

It is also misleading to imply that there is a monolithic central budget which represents the entirety of spending within the health service on teenage pregnancy. As the letter that Beverley Hughes and Caroline Flint sent to (among others) PCT chief executives on 20 July 2006 makes clear there is considerable regional discretion to spend money on local priorities too (as Polly acknowledges when she says that "Primary care trusts have no targets for children at risk, so NHS cuts are now harming children's programmes").

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She also writes:

Does Blair actually know that the Department for Education and Skills has already bought £7m worth of health visitors in pilot areas to identify and visit problem families every week for two years, and draw them into children's centres?

Which raises again the issue of whether it is possible to know something that isn't true. The DfES has "bought £7m worth of health visitors"? Really? William Wilberforce will be turning in his grave.

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She also writes:

Those first three years of life are critical - a short window to intervene but a lifetime for a child. The government is watching results from the Incredible Years programme pioneered by Dr Judy Hutchings in Sure Start in Wales: children of 42% of parents on the highly structured scheme showed lasting behaviour improvement, compared with just 7% in a control group.

The Incredible Years program actually targets children aged 2-8 and not below 3.

Worstall

September 01, 2006

Excellent News!

I'm sure all of the Pollyannistas will be so happy over this excellent news:

A group of wealthy City lawyers and merchant bankers are "super-gentrifying" the Islington neighbourhood where Tony Blair used to live in ways that undermine many of New Labour's most cherished assumptions, a report said yesterday.

The "super-gentrifiers" imposing their mark on the neighbourhood of Barnsbury derive their incomes from the huge salaries and bonuses made on global markets.

This largely Oxbridge-educated elite chooses to live in single-family terrace houses, rather than the mid-rise apartment blocks in Chelsea and Notting Hill where traditional bankers and stockbrokers tend to live, say the researchers.

They work long hours, socialise only among themselves, send their children to private schools and may have stronger ties to people living in New York's Brooklyn Heights than with some of their neighbours, according to the paper presented at the Royal Geographical Society's annual conference.

The way these "super-gentrifiers" have built an exclusive community with little respect for the cultural and historical character of the area they have colonised undermines some of New Labour's most cherished beliefs about the value of creating "mixed communities", say the authors.

You see, as Polly tells us, it's inequality that kills. As those slightly less fevered point out (like Richard Layard) it's those people we actually compare ourselves to, the levels of inequality there, that matter. As he also points out, we compare ourselves to the people within our own experience. We don't worry very much about David Beckham, but do about the people in our own social set.

Which means that this form of Balkanization is only to be applauded. The rich are living in a separate society so that the baleful influence of their wealth does not become apparent to the envious eyes of those poorer. This reduces if not eliminates the murderous effect of such inequality and so, by Polly's metric, more poor babies will survive.

I'm sure she'll be so happy with this development.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 05, 2006

Polly glot

On the 25th August, I took Polly Toynbee to task for writing that:

it [Sweden] tops the international happiness league

when in fact it doesn't. In a piece for *Dagens Nyheter* (rough translation is the *Daily News*) yesterday, however, the language changes:

På en global, hedonistisk skala har det här gjort er till ett av världens lyckligaste folk (trots

det orättvisa ryktet om svensk dysterhet).

Yes, yes, OK, the language has changed to Swedish, but the substance has changed too. She is now saying that the Swedes, despite the reputation for being gloomy are *one of* the world's happiest races and not *the* happiest. Which is fair enough.

No wonder they're so happy -- they get Polly Toynbee articles with actual facts!

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 07, 2006

Twice as bad

In a piece today on Comment is Free, Polly Toynbee writes:

As for these polls, just remember that the same voters who say they don't want Blair to go yet are the ones who give him satisfaction ratings twice as bad as when Mrs Thatcher was toppled

It's not the same voters 16 years on, of course, but more interesting is the "twice as bad" bit. Thatcher left on 22 November 1990, and MORI polls show that in a poll carried out between 15 and 19 November 1990 she had 25% satisfaction and 71% dissatisfaction.

Twice as bad as 71% disapproval? What's that, then, 142% disapproval? Actually, the latest MORI figures (same page as above) give Blair a 23% satisfaction rating, and 67% dissatisfaction.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 09, 2006

Belching out balls in all directions

On Comment is Free yesterday, Polly writes of Charles Clarke:

Could he see a slender "plague on both your houses" window of opportunity open up? He wouldn't rule it out yesterday. Does Malvolio come to mind?

Not unless you are confusing Malvolio and Mercutio, no.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2006

Hiss, and indeed sneer

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

With City bonuses this year at over £21bn, earnings themselves could and should be fairer

We've done the lie about City bonuses and the £21bn before, of course, so forgive me for not repeating myself.

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She also writes that:

Is the tax system too complicated? The CBI and other rightwing critics protest at a "rococo" bureaucracy where each year the budget now fills not just one but two hefty tomes. Tax accountants, they say, are enjoying a bonanza, as starting salaries for the newly qualified jumped

from £37,000 to £47,000 in 18 months. Oh for simplicity! they cry. But many of those voices are deeply disingenuous, to put it very politely indeed. Down-right bogus is nearer the mark.

I think she may have read yesterday's column by Jonathan Guthrie in the *Financial Times* -- the headline is "Why Brown's rococo work on tax will endure", it has the £37,000 to £47,000 figures, and the quote: "We have double volume finance acts year after year. Ten years ago they were a rarity." She goes on to say that the people who say this sort of thing are tax evaders. It is worth reading all of Guthrie's article, as this is not at all his point. Consider this quote from his article:

At a headline level, the "rising corporate tax burden" business bodies complain of reflects higher profits. John Whiting of PwC forecasts corporation tax payments will hit almost £50bn this financial year, compared with £28bn in 2003-2004. You cannot kvetch about that, since percentage rates have stayed broadly the same since 2002.

Oh? It's almost as if his point may not be about the overall tax burden, but maybe something else. Maybe the complexity created by poorly thought out schemes which turn out to have unintended consequences?

Much complexity has been created by Mr Brown's attempts to use tax breaks for the business equivalent of social engineering. The fiddly research and development tax credit, whose main beneficiaries have been big drug companies, was intended to stimulate innovation in businesses both large and small. A zero rate corporation tax band was meant to spur high-growth start-ups. Instead, it triggered incorporations from the self-employed and a U-turn from the Treasury.

Oh, but never mind the subtleties, there's broad ideological attacking to be done!

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On which note, she says:

The rich command every outlet of opinion that says tax is always a "burden", low taxes good and high taxes bad.

What she's doing here is claiming that the rich are taking reality and having it grotesquely distorted in the media. They have control of the media, and are often eager to abuse it for their own biased ideological purposes.

Oh, no, wait a moment. That stuff about "grotesquely distorted" and "abuse it for their own ideological purposes" is actually Polly talking about what she used to do when she used to work for the BBC, an institution which, unlike the newspapers, is supposed to be ideologically neutral.

Honi soit.

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We're also treated to a re-run of this garbage:

Few politicians dare remind people that what they value most - their health, their children's education, their safety, the pleasantness of streets or the beauty of public spaces - are all bought by taxes: the pound in their pocket only buys life's lesser things.

Ah, yes, life's lesser things. Like food.

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The column says that:

Taxes are a moral good, and avoiding your fair share is a moral disgrace

and goes on to say that:

Taxes do three traditional things: raise cash for public services, redistribute from richer to poorer, or induce people to change their behaviour - less drinking, smoking and driving cars.

She neglects to mention that taxes are also a way to allow elected politicians to give £7,000 to newspaper columnists who praise them in a non-competitive procurement process in order to cut and paste some old newspaper columns together.

Ken Livingstone did this to Polly Toynbee, of course. To do this, he used some of the money which I paid in tax. I think that is a moral disgrace, and Polly Toynbee's accepting the fee was a moral disgrace.

Worstall

September 15, 2006

Polly on Taxation

Ah, I think we now have incontrovertible evidence that the dear old trout has gone entirely batshit crazy. How about this for a view of taxation:

Few politicians dare remind people that what they value most - their health, their children's education, their safety, the pleasantness of streets or the beauty of public spaces - are all bought by taxes: the pound in their pocket only buys life's lesser things.

Yup, there you have it. The money that we get to spend ourselves, that money that we actually have a choice about spending, is mere pocket money, to be used for the trivial gewgaws that distract our tiny minds, after the *bien pensant* politicians and bureaucrats that rule us have taken what they wish to provide us with what they wish.

Further, she rather begs the question (the logical sin of *petitio principii*) in her listing of things that are paid for by taxation. Health and education for example: the argument is not whether they are or are not paid or from taxation currently, but whether they ought to be paid for from taxation, as currently, or is there another, better, method?

A swift comparison of the public and private education systems in the UK would lead to at least a few thoughts on this matter perhaps? The difference between the quality on offer in the two sectors has, for example, been noted more than occasionally.

On health, well, should it necessarily be paid for as at present? I doubt very much that many in the UK would

like to have the US system of financing but then I'm equally sure that many would like to have the quality of the French system: one, worth noting, that does not (except for cancer treatment) provide treatment free at the point of consumption. Rather, there is a deductible of 25% of the cost which must be paid by the patient: or by the private insurance that many carry.

Now, contrary to popular conceptions I'm not an anarchist, I do believe in both the value of the State and the taxation to pay for it. However, the State exists, is a contract entered into by us, the free citizenry, to provide those things collectively which cannot be provided individually or purely by contract or personal agreement. Defense, a legal system, safety perhaps in the form of a policing system (something we might note that is not being effectively provided currently) and so on.

The taxes to pay for these things are indeed necessary, but they're a necessary evil, not a moral good in and of themselves (unlikewhat the sub editor of Polly's piece thinks).

Taxes do three traditional things: raise cash for public services, redistribute from richer to poorer, or induce people to change their behaviour - less drinking, smoking and driving cars. But that 50p rate does something else besides. It is a totem in its own right. It stands as public recognition that society does not approve of galloping inequality. With City bonuses this year at over £21bn, earnings themselves could and should be fairer: this small extra tax band at least expresses disapproval.

Of Polly's three reasons to tax I'm all in favour of the first: I just want a rigorous and exhaustive analysis of exactly which services should be funded publically and of the taxes used to pay for them. The third, Pigouvian taxation, is fine by me in principle but I get very wary about exactly which behaviours people try to discourage. Only those with a negative externality would be a good guiding principle I think, just as one example, and again, I'd want to see some pretty rigorous proof of the existence of that externality (and of course the taxation should be equal to the costs of those externalities).

The second reason I reject. I'm all for the provision of a safety net, but redistribution for redistribution's sake doesn't excite me (despite the fact that for much of my working life I would have been one of those being redistributed to if I had played the system).

The fourth though, the 50% rate? Taxation as moral gesture? Quite batshit.

So whenever you hear City financiers or CBI spokespersons protesting that the tax system is "too complex" and should be "simplified", just ask them to declare precisely what kind of cat's cradle tax planning regimes they have devised for themselves to avoid paying their fair whack. If they want simple and transparent, let's just start with their own affairs.

Indeed. So has Polly been sending her 50% tax rate to the Treasury? Please make cheques to "The Accountant, HM Treasury", 1 Horse Guards Road.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has just launched a review of the entire tax system, led by Sir

James Mirrlees, Nobel prize winner for studies of the world's optimal tax systems. It is time to go back to first principles and ask why the bottom 10% pay a higher marginal rate than the well off and why the rich pay so little in a society where they own almost everything.

Ah, finally, something I can agree with. It is indeed absurd that the poor pay a high marginal rate. It's actually absurd that the poor pay anything at all. The simplest solution here is a tripling of the personal allowance. Even, as was suggested in comments recently, a quadrupling, so that only those on higher than median incomes pay any income tax at all. This would create a much more progressive tax system than the one we have now, presumably something Polly would approve of.

It would also mean that the State would have to be cut, drastically, because it would not be possible to raise the current revenue solely from those on more than median incomes. I would approve of that.

A win/win situation then, both Polly and I in agreement.

Swede dreams

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

Aware of the threat from a new young face after 12 years in office, Goran Persson tried to deflect criticism for staying too long by promoting fresh-faced young ministers, as Tony Blair has.

Persson has not been prime minister for 12 years -- he has held the office since 22 March 1996.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2006

What happened to the middle class?

In a follow-up post, Polly Toynbee writes today that Sweden:

[let] private schools enter the state system with state finding, now educating some 7% of pupils
and that

What he [Adonis] doesn't say is that the middle classes mostly use the private schools, with a drastic effect on making schools far more socially segregated than they were before.

So, if private schools educate 7% of kids, and the middle class "mostly" use them, a maximum of 14% of kids can be middle-class. Eh? You'd need a pretty bizarre definition of middle class to get to 14% of kids, particularly in a society which is -- as we are constantly reminded -- as egalitarian as Sweden's...

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She also writes that:

The right's campaign centred on unemployment - and here indeed Goran Persson's Social Democrat government was too slow to learn from New Labour's reforms. This despite many of Persson's ministers visiting Britain to examine the New Deal, with its successful carrot-and-stick format of intensive personal help for claimants combined with a firm obligation to seek work, train or learn.

Actually, a large issue in Sweden was not the officially **un**employed [belated update] -- relatively low at about 6% -- but rather those on long-term disability benefit (see, for example, the last paragraph of this report in the *Guardian*). In the UK, the figure on incapacity benefit is about 2.7m (source), so perhaps not a great role model.

The learning from this government couldn't be how to tackle the problem, but only how not to make it the subject of public debate.

Correlatus belli

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

If the Iraq analogy seems over the top, consider this: Ipsos Mori finds that attitudes towards the NHS are coloured by what voters already think of the government - not the other way round, as previously assumed. Disenchantment with the government translates into scepticism about the NHS. So all the reasons why Labour is slipping in support - Iraq and its aura being a root cause - bleed back into views on the NHS. [emphasis added]

If you're interested in reading the actual research as opposed to someone who is "eager to abuse it for their own biased ideological purposes" like Polly, have a look at the original research. On page 7, it says:

Support for the Government seems to be tied to the public's perception of the NHS so that disenchantment with the Government translates into scepticism about the NHS and vice versa. A range of opinion polling suggests that confidence in the Government's conduct of public service reform and management of public services is currently not high and has declined markedly over the last few years. Negative views of the Government's approach to other issues including criminal justice, asylum, Iraq and a number of other areas may also have had an impact. [emphasis added]

So actually, the report shows correlation not causation -- it does not show that attitudes towards the NHS are coloured by what voters already think of the government, merely that people who are less satisfied with the NHS are also likely to be less satisfied with the government.

More to come during the day...

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2006

National press unreliable? I wonder why.

In today's column, Polly also writes:

There is a sharp difference between recent patients and those who draw their view only from media anecdote or from bad-mouthing friends among the 1.2 million grumbling NHS staff. Polling shows that patients are overwhelmingly pleased with their GPs and hospitals - but voters who haven't used hospitals are unreasonably dissatisfied.

Again, the actual research is less shrill (see [post below for link to it](#)). For starters, the polling clearly does not show that people "who haven't used hospitals are unreasonably dissatisfied" -- there is reliable no way of testing the "reasonableness" of their dissatisfaction.

As for where people get their information about the NHS, the situation is more nuanced than "media anecdotalism" and friends who work for the NHS. Page 8 of the research shows that people also get their information from leaflets, direct mail, and from friends who don't work in the NHS. The most favourable source of information (leaflets in GPs' surgeries) are also thought to be the most reliable (only 12% think them unreliable). The most unfavourable source of information (the national press) is also thought to be least reliable (51% find the national press unreliable. I can't think why).

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Polly also writes:

...the NHS is flush with cash. Pay rises have made UK doctors and nurses the best-paid in the EU: dentists now earn £150,000pa.

Compare that with this quote from Liam Byrne in Hansard:

Most dentists who provide national health service primary dental care services are not paid on a salaried basis, but through a system of NHS fees and other payments that go towards the costs of running a dental practice as well as the dentist's net income.

[...] DPB payment data show that on average, a dentist with a reasonable NHS commitment in 2004–05 in the GDS received gross GDS income of about £154,350. Dentists with a reasonable commitment are defined as those with gross fee earnings of £59,100 or more. These averages covered some 7,640 GDS principal dentists who worked throughout the year 2004–05. HM Revenue and Customs information from dentists' tax returns show that the average ratio of expenses to gross earnings for a highly committed NHS dentist is around 52 per cent. (2003–04 tax year). The same source gives average net income of a highly committed NHS dentist from all sources as £78,600 in the tax year 2003–04. Average expenses were about £85,200. This information is taken from the tax returns of 392 GDS principal dentists who were in non-associate business arrangements for whom the tax year ended between January and March 2004.

Based on the data from these sources, the Department estimates that a highly committed GDS dentist earns an average NHS income of around £80,000 in 2005–06.

This is not the same as earning £150,000 a year -- you do actually have to deduct the expenses.

WORSTALL

September 22, 2006

Polly on the NHS

Well, if you say so Pollyanna:

No problem either in stirring up local Tories and Lib Dems, with newspaper campaigns to fire up every citizen in the town. The protesting consultant who intends to stand for parliament in Bedford may be only the first of a new wave. Labour MPs will join the scrum to save their seats. In Stockton, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool they are locked in public combat over which of them loses

a maternity unit.

No wonder every previous government chickened out. Closures may be the right thing - but perhaps not now, when they will be portrayed as "cuts" to meet Labour's deficits. Indeed they are partly to save wasted money. Good arguments and specious arguments will blend into one story: "Labour cuts risk lives to save cash".

This is, of course, inevitable. If you have a medical system entirely controlled by the political process then people will use the political process to get what they want out of it. While the NHS is run, in mind numbing detail, from the centre by elected politicians then people will vote on the basis, and politicians will fight over, said system. You can't take the politics out of it until you take the politicians out of it.

Now add that beating heart of Labour's reforms - payment by results, the full-throttle market, only beginning to bite. (No other country anywhere has introduced such a ferocious market, let alone so fast and all at once.)

There's a very good reason for that. Now, what was it?

The NHS could lose Labour the next election; that would let NHS predators claim that the whole universal free system is "unfit for purpose". A rising noise on the right, much encouraged by the rightwing press, calls for the introduction of insurance-based schemes. Every time the NHS stumbles they crow at this "proof" that a free, tax-based system can't survive.

Ahh, that's right. No one else has ever actually copied our insane system of 1.2 million people run by a Stalinist bureaucracy. Where health care is indeed entirely state funded it is devolved downwards to smaller organisations. Like the counties in Sweden.

And do you know what? The health system that the international statistics show is the best one, the French, is based on insurance. Perhaps, just maybe, the righties are right? That tax-based free at the point of use (for of course tax-based is not 'free' in the idiotic way that Polly describes it above) is not actually the best way in the world to run a system, certainly not if you're going to try and do it with rigid central control of 1.2 million people?

A little White truth-seeking

On GU's Labour conference podcast yesterday (MP3 [here](#)), hosted by her colleague Mike White, Polly Toynbee said this (about 14m50s in):

TOYNBEE: ... Tony Blair took such a very different view about Iraq to all of the rest of the people of Europe, who were 90% against going into Iraq, so it was we who stuck out like a sore thumb on that...

WHITE: Ooh, I'm going to check that percent.

You'd be wise to, Mike. Start with Pew, who on 18 March 2003 showed that opposition in France was 75%,

and 69% in Germany. Go on to Gallup, who in January 2003 didn't show opposition at or exceeding 90% in any European country. Even Noam Chomsky doesn't quite have the audacity to claim 90% opposition. On 9 March 2003 he said:

*In Italy, it's reached **almost** 90 percent opposition to war under any conditions, and **close to that** in Spain. [emphasis added]*

To be fair, one poll did show 91% opposition in Spain, but this was after the war started, and is hardly pan-European.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2006

Whoa, Manchester

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

Labour rules on the mandate of just a quarter of the electorate.

Would that it were a quarter of the electorate, in fact it is comfortably below.

And rules? *Rules?* I thought they governed.

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His good idea this week has been devolving within Whitehall - at last creating a sensible divide between the board (ministers) setting the direction and the executive (trained professionals) running things.

Make that *last* week.

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There is no reason not to start by introducing the alternative vote right away - giving voters the right to place their preferences in 1,2,3 order instead of an X. [...] Jack Straw, Charles Clarke and Alan Milburn are among diverse recent alternative-vote converts.

There is a very good reason -- it is called Arrow's Impossibility Theorem, which proves that no voting system which relies on ranked preferences can produce a fair result if there are more than two options (the original article was published in the *Journal of Political Economy* in 1950). The Alternative Vote system (aka Instant-runoff voting) has a number of flaws -- e.g. it is possible for Candidate 1 to be elected even if a majority of voters prefer Candidate 2 to Candidate 1 (see the wikipedia page on Alternative Vote for more detail). Now, this doesn't mean we shouldn't introduce AV, but it does show that it is flawed, it is one of several necessarily flawed alternatives, and we need to work out what problem we're trying to solve before introducing something "right away".

And since when were three middle-aged white men considered diverse?

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2006

The un-quote

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes of Blair's farewell speech:

The deftness of his opening Cherie joke - "She won't run off with the bloke next door" - was all the reminder they needed.

I'm enough of an old-fashioned pedant to think that when you put something between quote marks, it should be what someone actually said. Polly clearly disagrees. What Blair actually said was:

"At least I don't have to worry about her running off with the bloke next door."

This is according to the *Guardian*, the BBC, the *Herald*, the *Telegraph*, *The Times*, the *Independent*, the *Financial Times*, the *Mirror*, and, well, you get point.

Polly's disdain for the truth is a thing of wonder.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2006

And she thinks he's an attack dog?

In today's column, Polly Toynbee quotes extensively from:

Deborah Mattinson, the chief executive of Opinion Leader Research

A shame she doesn't bother to get the job title right.

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She writes about Frank Luntz's polling exercise for Newsnight thus:

He must have been excited by a spectacular item on Newsnight. The US pollster Frank Luntz explored the popularity of Labour's possible leadership contenders. He showed brief video clips of each to 30 Labour-minded voters, who turned dials up and down as they watched each contender speak. Most of the candidates' clips seemed chosen for pallid dullness - except for the crucial two: one showed Brown a bit hesitant when interviewed under pressure after the coup attempt. The other showed Reid in full-on harangue: "Any court judgment that puts the human rights of foreign prisoners ahead of the safety and security of millions of British citizens is wrong! Full stop. No qualification!" Of course Reid beat Brown by miles.

It certainly is worth watching. At the time of writing, you could watch it here. I would thoroughly recommend it; Polly is distorting it quite badly. The session lasted three hours, and even before the video clips -- long before the video clips -- initial reactions were gathered, just using photographs of the candidates. At this stage, only one out of the panel of thirty thought that Gordon Brown could lead the Labour party to victory in the next general election (about 2m05s), and someone who knows their Shakespeare better than Polly describes Brown as "Brutus", again long before the videos are shown (about 5m20s). Polly also neglects to mention the strong, positive response to Brown giving a speech (at about 8m30s).

And, of course, the quote she attributes to Reid is not what he actually said (at about 12m05s in the video clip), which was:

Any court judgment that puts human rights of foreign prisoners ahead of the human right

to safety and security of the millions of the UK citizens is a wrong decision. Full stop. No qualification.

After Wednesday's inaccurate quote, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. But I confess to still being shocked when I see a quality newspaper print something in quote marks which was not said.

Worstall

September 29, 2006

PollyAnna

Err,

Reformed old communists have this in common: when they swing the other way, they always go that bit too far. They never take off their combat kit: the progressive social democratic gene is alien to their psyche.

Genes? Psyche?

But it is a sign of something almost as depressing. I lost count of the number of times Reid used the word "leadership" in his tough, tough, tough speech, as he put his marker down to be first among possible challengers. So far it's just a threatening gesture from the bruiser lurking in the alleyway. It smacks of both bullying and cowardice: without the bottle for a fight, he will hang about flashing that stiletto under his coat, hoping Gordon trips up all by himself during the next excruciating months of uncertainty.

Without the bottle? Used to describe a reformed drunk? Tsk, Polly, the gutter beckons.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 03, 2006

In a manor secret

In today's column, Polly Toynbee refers to the Coleshill Manor story. She thinks it employs a

secret staff of 50

So secret, in fact, that they advertise for jobs (see here for Google's cache of a now expired job advertisement, which was running on 21 June). So secret that Michael Howard publicised his visit to it on election day 2005 . So secret that the *Telegraph* had a story about it in March 2005.

The funding mechanism for it may be contentious, but the staff are not secret.

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She still has trouble accurately reproducing quotes. She claims Cameron said:

"the government which instinctively believes everything is the state's responsibility"

He actually said:

"These last nine years have been the story of a Government which instinctively believes, whatever it says, that everything is the state's responsibility," (emphasis added).

She claims he said:

"People, families, communities, businesses, to step up to the plate and ... actively do good things."

He actually said:

"We need people, families, communities, businesses to step up to the plate and understand that it's not just about stopping the bad things, it's about actively doing the good things" (emphasis added).

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 05, 2006

Wariness replaced by weariness

I'll be taking a break until the end of October.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2006

Disgraceful

In today's column about Velcade, Polly Toynbee writes:

Disgracefully, Andrew Lansley, the shadow health secretary, claimed at the weekend that he would prescribe the drug, adding an absurd promise that he would also "renegotiate" its price with the manufacturers. As if.

Paying no attention to Nice's rebuttal, ITV's The Sunday Edition paraded three patients with bone-marrow cancer desperately seeking the drug, understandably anxious for any shred of extra hope. Who wouldn't be?

Andrew Lansley's interview on *The Sunday Edition* is, at the time of writing, [available online here](#). What he actually said was:

I think we should give patients the drug and allow the NHS to negotiate with the drug company concerned, Johnson and Johnson, in order to arrive at a price for the drug that is cost-effective. Because, the problem is at the moment that NICE have no ability to negotiate with the drug company. The price is given.

When asked by the interviewer:

So you are very clear then that if you were Health Secretary, and indeed the current Healthy Secretary should give the drug to myeloma sufferers now?

He replied:

Yes, through that process [the one described above] and I do have to be clear about this.

Because there is no point in having NICE and then taking the decision yourself. They do a professional job at trying to assess cost-effectiveness. But the price is given to them. They can't negotiate it. I think what the NHS should be doing, what the Secretary of State should be doing is negotiating the price with the drug company, doing in effect a risk-sharing deal with drug company so the NHS can continue to treat patients and depending on the effectiveness of the drug... I mean Jacky [one of the three sufferers who were "paraded" by ITV on the television. Note that their website is here] was saying to us just a few minutes ago she thinks it can prolong life by two or three years. Well, if that is proven in a population of myeloma sufferers who get the drug, then actually it would be a cost-effective drug.

This is not Lansley trying to "prescribe" the drug -- not something which would be terribly practical in any case for someone who is not a doctor.

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Polly also writes:

Scotland has approved it for only a tiny number of patients in the last weeks of life.

Actually, no. The SMC says that Velcade is:

accepted for use within NHS Scotland for the treatment of patients with multiple myeloma who have already received at least two therapies, have seen their disease progress on the last therapy and who are unresponsive to alternative licensed treatments for this stage of the disease.

This is not the same as "in the last weeks of life."

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She also says that:

Its first trial of strength with the drug companies was its defining moment. When Nice said no to the flu drug Relenza (except for exceptional conditions), Glaxo threatened to pull out of Britain in revenge. Nice held firm, Glaxo stayed.

Actually, Frank Dobson said no to Relenza in October 1999. Sir Richard Sykes complained about "recently enforced price cuts" and criticised "the government's inaction over parallel imports" and "condemned the government's failure to maintain the level of science study among sixth formers despite its claim to favour a science and technology-based society." According to the *Guardian*:

Although the spokesman said Glaxo - which spends more than 50% of its research budget in, but derives only 6% of its sales from, the UK - was not threatening to move offshore, he added: "These factors call into question the attractiveness of the UK to a global company." The company suggested that others in the sector might also consider moving out of the UK.

"If you continue to make the environment antagonistic to this industry then by definition it will start to move elsewhere," said Sir Richard.

That's not a threat to pull out of Britain.

Nonetheless, NICE "held firm" for about a year before the *Guardian* was reporting that "Relenza receives

limited approval" in November 2000.

Worstell

October 24, 2006

Polly Gets Nice

Quite amazing today. Polly actually seems to have some grasp of economics:

But it isn't as simple as that. Faced with patients clinging to any last straw, the big questions remain. What is a life worth? How good a quality of life should be saved, at what price, for how long? Nice has a rule of thumb using QALYs, or quality-adjusted life years. A year of life in a reasonable condition is worth £20,000-£25,000. Anything over £30,000 needs to be an exceptional case: that's not personal circumstance but a rare condition with absolutely no other treatment. Nice has to consider what better treatments could be bought for how many others for the cost of holding off death for a few more painful months? Never easy, it will always depend on how much cash there is in the pot. And politicians need to ask if an NHS pound really buys more wellbeing than other services?

Now, if we can just get her to apply that insight to everything: that there is indeed a limited pot of money, that we cannot buy everything that we want: like, for example, free high quality child care for everyone? Or rather we can, but it will be at the expense of something else: we need to calculate the trade offs, not simply state that it sounds like a very nice idea so let's go do it.

Sadly, her arguments then decline:

Professor Karol Sikora and the rightwing group Doctors for Reform call "the current socialist model" of the NHS "dogma". Instead they want patients to get basic NHS-standard treatments as approved by Nice, with the option to buy unapproved treatments by paying extra or buying top-up insurance. Sikora, writing in the Mail, compares it to private opticians letting people choose glasses to suit their purse, but the state ensuring no one goes without.

NHS provision is unequal now, but this would create an instant class divide, far greater than the 11% who currently use some private medicine. It would herald the end of a universal NHS altogether, but then perhaps it is the logical next step in the "choice" agenda. It's alarming how Tony Blair and some of his ministers listen to Sikora's market vision with intense interest.

Excuse me, but what is actually wrong with this vision? Why should people be barred from topping up with their own money their health care? Why shouldn't people 'clutching at the last straw' be able to pay £30,000 for an extra year of life? Purely because this would lead to inequality in health care treatment? Really?

I can see that a tax funded system should indeed hand out the care equitably: but why the ban on topping it up? Is it really true that people should be barred from disposing of their own property as they wish, should in fact simply roll over and die, so as to preserve equality?

Is Polly really ready to go to one of those people with multiple myeloma, look them in the face and say, no, you must die in the name of equality?

Update: The Tin Drummer gets a little more vehement on the subject than I did.

Now just plain making stuff up

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes about the proposed companies bill, and specifically a clause to require companies to disclose information about their suppliers. She writes:

The Financial Times all this week has run a loud and intimidating campaign against one clause, with a front-page splash and yesterday's thundering leader attacking industry minister Margaret Hodge. The subclause they oppose is the only item in this monumental bill that concedes anything to the lobby for stronger corporate social responsibility to protect the environment and communities.

This is part of a broader charge against the *FT*, that it has become the mouthpiece of the CBI:

The growing influence of the CBI over the once independent-minded and more nuanced Financial Times is sad to behold: now that its former editor Richard Lambert heads the CBI, he seems to not only adopt belligerent CBI narrow-mindedness but to cast the FT under the CBI's sway too.

Actually, the *FT* leader (linkhere, possibly requiring a subscription) is less than thundering in its criticism of the clause:

Yet the harm is less in the clause than in how it was introduced.

The *FT* leader agrees with Polly that on the face of it the clause requires something similar to the Operating and Financial Reviews that were originally proposed, but then vetoed by Gordon Brown. In fact, the *FT* says:

At first sight, the new proposal for companies to disclose information about suppliers looks similar to the government plans for statutory operating and financial reviews (OFRs) that were in the bill until the Treasury decided to scrap them. This type of broader business commentary can help to focus attention on strategic questions beyond the next quarterly earnings figures. But the original OFR proposals were firmly underpinned by detailed accounting standards in a way that the current plans are not. This makes them harder for businesses to interpret. The DTI promises guidance: that must emphasise that the information need be given only where it is material and is at directors' discretion. Even then, there are likely to be high-profile and costly legal challenges as the non-governmental organisations that have pressed for the proposal try out how it is being applied in practice.

Read that carefully -- the complaint is not about the requirement to report, but rather that the requirement to do so in an ambiguous way generates uncertainty.

Indeed, Polly complains that:

The spectacle of the CBI and the Institute of Directors in full war cry is enough to frighten any government. How arrogantly they stamp, rampage and threaten mere elected politicians.

(I think in psychology this is called projection). However, compare that with the *FT* leader which says that:

In their dealings with government, businesses should not always expect to get their own way. They do need consultation and certainty.

Thus, apparently, the mouthpiece of the CBI in full war cry, arrogantly stamping, rampaging and threatening.

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Polly also writes:

An ICM poll shows that 90% of the public want companies to be legally obliged to report on their social responsibilities

Actually, according to the CORE press release:

90% of voters think that "the Government should set out enforceable rules to ensure companies are 'socially responsible', for example to ensure companies do not damage the environment."

That's not "legally obliged to report".

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When writing about CORE, Polly Toynbee writes:

Campaigners for greater openness are the Corporate Responsibility Coalition (Core) and the Trade Justice Movement, with over 130 organisations and 9 million members.

CORE represents 130 organisations, and the TJM claims to be:

a coalition of over 80 UK organisations with over 9 million individual members.

That's not having 9 million members. The list of member organisations is here, and includes, for example, the Church of England and UNISON. I think it's a bit rich to describe their members as being members of the TJM.

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Polly also writes:

But imagine a government that dared stand up to them [i.e. CBI and IoD]. On behalf of shareholders, simple questions should be put: why do directors pay themselves obscene sums, a 28% rise in the boardrooms this year, all of it stolen from citizens' pension funds and Peps?

Skip lightly over the rhetoric about "stolen", and that of course shareholders do ask these sorts of questions without needing the state to do it for them according to the *Observer*, but consider the implication for a moment that the only shareholders in UK companies are pension funds and PEPs, and rightly discard it for the ill-informed and facile assumption that it is.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2006

Anyone have a bridge that needs painting?

There's more from Polly's column today ([see previous post for the bulk of it, though](#)). Polly writes:

On behalf of shareholders, simple questions should be put: why do directors pay themselves obscene sums, a 28% rise in the boardrooms this year, all of it stolen from citizens' pension funds and Peps?

[emphasis added]

Compare that with this, from the *Guardian* on 2 October 2006:

Directors' pay at Britain's top companies soared by 28% last year, more than seven times the rate of average pay and 11 times the current rate of inflation.

[emphasis added]

Worstall

October 27, 2006

Polly, Polly

Polly goes off on a rant. Yes, I know, surprising. Best answer to it is in the comments. So nothing more from me today on this subject:

shinsei

October 27, 2006 08:28 AM

(Polly)"But imagine a government that dared stand up to them. On behalf of shareholders, simple questions should be put: why do directors pay themselves obscene sums, a 28% rise in the boardrooms this year, all of it stolen from citizens' pension funds and Peps?"

This year the Guardian Media Group (Guardian, Observer & Guardian On-line) made losses of almost £50m. Alan Rusbridger, editor and board director, saw his pay rise from £373,000 to £504,000. A rise of 35%.

NB. That doesn't include his bonus nor his pension top up.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2006

Know nothing press

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

parents still overwhelmingly oppose religious schools - by 64% in a Guardian/ICM poll.

Actually, it's not parents, they don't oppose religious schools (but they do oppose state funding) and the, er, *Guardian* thinks that the timing of the poll may have affected the results:

The survey reveals that following last month's terror attacks, the majority of the public are uneasy about the proposals, with 64% agreeing that "the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind".

She also writes:

Catholics led the charge, with "Three days to save our faith schools" blazoned across the Catholic



Herald.

At the time of writing, you could see the front page on the Catholic Herald website, which clearly shows the headline to be "Three days to save our Catholic schools". It takes a rare skill to be able to misquote a "blazoned" headline.

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She also writes:

But the UK and Denmark are the only countries where drinking is on the rise.

Here, her research methodology is unusually clear -- she read yesterday's paper, when Martin Plant had a letter published in the *Guardian* which said:

Britain is the only country in western Europe (apart from Denmark) where alcohol consumption is still rising.

Note the omission of "in western Europe" from Polly's column. In fact, there are many countries where alcohol consumption is on the increase. At the World Resources Institute online database, for example, you can pull up litres of alcohol consumed per adult in a number of countries with trends -- and it shows increases in countries from Albania to Zimbabwe.

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UPDATE: Mr Eugenides has written to me, taking a break from posting the sublime, to point out that when Polly writes:

alcohol now costs 54% less in real terms than it did in 1980.

it contrasts with the Economic and Social Research Council's take on it:

*In real terms, since 1981 the price of alcohol **relative to incomes** has decreased by 54 per cent.*

[emphasis added]

Which is of course not the same thing at all.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 02, 2006

Polly now gets stealth-edited to remove the errors

In today's "Corrections and clarifications" column in the *Guardian*, there is this:

A headline in last week's Catholic Herald read "Three days to save our Catholic schools", not "Three days to save our faith schools" (Government cowardice could be the death of us all, page 33, October 31).

Which refers, of course, to Polly's most recent column, which I wrote about here. Clearly, I need to use pictures rather than words more often.

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Interestingly, the *Guardian* appears to stealth-edit errors out of articles online. Readers with long memories will remember that in August this year, Polly referred to Bill Rammell as the MP for Harrow West rather than for Harlow. A pretty curious error, as it can't have been a slip on the keyboard (L is nowhere near R and in any case it is difficult to accidentally type "West"), but be that as it may, it was corrected here on August 24th, which says:

Contrary to what we said in a column, The Byers plan deliberately ignores obscene inequality, page 27 (Comment), August 22, the higher education minister Bill Rammell is not the MP for Harrow West. His constituency is Harlow.

If, however, you now go to Polly's column, the original error has been airbrushed out of history. It now says:

Bill Rammell, the higher education minister and MP for Harlow, said sharply...

As opposed to the original, which said:

Bill Rammell, the higher education minister and MP for hyper-marginal Harrow West, said sharply...

Given that the *Guardian* has edited this, it is difficult to source authoritatively, but I have copied and pasted the above quote from the cache on my PC, and [you can also see the Pendant's contemporaneous copy and paste here.](#)

For shame.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 03, 2006

Drawing her own conclusions

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes about a report "buried" by the DWP ([here on their website](#)), in which Lisa Harker:

concludes with this overwhelming truth: "The major drivers of poverty - such as high levels of wage and wealth inequality - remain considerable impediments towards reaching the 2020 child-poverty target, suggesting that far greater changes to the distribution of wealth, earnings and opportunity in society will be necessary."

The quote (actually not a full sentence, despite Polly's punctuation) is not the conclusion of the report at all, it is from the executive summary. And it is not even from the final sentence. In fact, the sentence following

the one from which the quote was taken begins "But, ...".

Worstall

November 03, 2006

Polly on Child Poverty

Lovely to see how the grand project of circular reasoning works again. Having all but abolished absolute poverty in the UK the definition is changed to being relative poverty. We can therefore all go on crying out for something to be done about poverty.

The rhetoric allows us to associate being in relative poverty (less than 60% of median household incomes, adjusted for housing costs and family size) with being in absolute (living under t' sweet paper in middle of t' motorway).

Then in order to solve such 'poverty' as we have defined it we get this:

Her excellent report makes sensible recommendations for improving the various New Deals to help poor families into better jobs. But she concludes with this overwhelming truth: "The major drivers of poverty - such as high levels of wage and wealth inequality - remain considerable impediments towards reaching the 2020 child-poverty target, suggesting that far greater changes to the distribution of wealth, earnings and opportunity in society will be necessary."

Because we have defined poverty in the beginning as a relative thing then only by highly redistributive taxation can we end such poverty as we have defined it. Entirely circular reasoning, all stemming from the way that the 'problem' has been defined in the first place.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 07, 2006

Her id is safe!

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

Social mobility has come to a halt, crushed by this new era of mega-greed.

Social mobility has *come to a halt*? Even the much reported upon paper by Blanden, Gregg and Machin, called "Intergenerational Mobility in Europe and North America" (headlines included: 'UK low in social mobility league, says charity' in the *Guardian*) showed that for men born in the 1970's, if their father's income was in the bottom quartile, they stood a 37% chance of also having income in the bottom quartile ([see table 1 in their paper; pdf link here](#)).

Now, for complete social mobility, that could be 25%, but to say that you have a better than 3 in 5 chance of escaping bottom-quartile incomes is not social mobility "come to a halt".

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She writes that:

Mori finds that about 80% of people support the idea of ID cards

In the same survey, only 27% said they knew "[a] great deal" or "[a] fair amount" about the ID card scheme -- 39% knew "[j]ust a little", 28% had "[h]eard of it, but know nothing about it" and 6% had never heard of it.

It seems curious to be so approving of the MORI position, and yet also think that "[t]he public cavil endlessly at politicians while wallowing in wilful ignorance and bitter prejudice," as Polly does.

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On 18 July, Polly wrote:

The eyes of would-be nuclear builders, meanwhile, are on Areva, the French government-subsidised company building in Finland the first new nuclear station anywhere in decades.

And I took her to task here, pointing out that in 2004, 27 nuclear power constructions worldwide were under constuction.

Today, she writes of:

proliferating nuclear power stations

I am glad that the message is (very) slowly and unevenly getting through.

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Incidentally, contrast her approval of citizens' views on what makes them feel safer when they happen to agree with her in today's column:

As for CCTV, when Mori asks local communities what would make their areas safer, street cameras always come in the top three. It's easy to see why: people on an estate I know say CCTV helped transform the only local shopping street, which had been rife with drugs and prostitution.

With the despairing, "why don't they understand?" take on citizens' views on how safe they feel when they happen to disagree with Polly, from 22 April, 2005.

A more finely tuned bullshit radar

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

at the 2005 election women and men voted identically.

Of course, the only way of getting to this is through polls, which are numerous and often contradictory. But that should call therefore for greater precision when discussing results, not less. There is indeed a source which claims that men and women *intended* to vote in almost identical ways -- the table at the bottom of this report by the BBC. However, read it carefully, and you'll see that it does not talk about how people *actually* voted -- it is a sum of all campaign polls, of intentions in other words.

However, if you look at the polls which ask about how people *actually* voted, you'll see the big differences. Take this:

One major surprise for Labour was contained in the final campaign polls for ICM and Populus which showed that women were crucial to Labour's victory last night.

Both pollsters showed that women were far less likely to vote Conservative - only 27% - than men, 33% of whom backed the Tories. Instead, 25% of women turned to the Liberal Democrats and 39% backed Labour. This compared with 20% of men voting for the Lib Dems and 37% for Labour.

Which came from the, er, *Guardian*. The Fawcett Society found something very similar:

At the general election 2005, Labour polled higher support among women than among men, with support at 38% and 34% respectively.

[p2 of "Fawcett/ Ipsos MORI briefing on women's votes, September 2006". [Word document available here](#)]

Jam on the breaks

I suggested some months ago that I needed to take more breaks, and the evidence base is growing. While I was on a break last month, Polly wrote a piece entitled "Only a fully secular state can protect women's rights", which today prompted this correction:

We said in a comment piece, [Only a fully secular state can protect women's rights](#), October 17, page 33, that white parents had taken over four church secondary schools in Tower Hamlets, making them virtually all white. No maintained primary or secondary school in Tower Hamlets has a proportion of white pupils higher than 71%.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2006

Contradictory thought deathmatch

From today's column:

Abolish the "provocation" defence for jealous men who kill their wives.

versus

John Reid's announcement yesterday of yet more criminal-justice legislation hardly feels like refreshment: Labour's 59 obsessive criminal-justice bills have often been repealed before they have been enacted.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2006

Some are odder than others

In her column on Friday, Polly wrote:

British women are odd: traditionally, in France, Germany and Italy women lean to the left and men lean rightwards; but in Britain the right only ever won on the women's vote.

In 1979, 1983 and 1987, occasions on which the right can be have said to have won, men voted clearly for the Tories. In 1979, 45% voted Tory to 38% Labour, in 1983 it was 46% to 30% and in 1987 it was 44% to 31%, according to Table 2 of "Gender and Contemporary British Politics" by Pippa Norris. I'd have fancied their chances, even without the women's vote.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2006

Doesn't let death get in the way

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

Occasionally the stage curtain is twitched back to expose the way things are.

So true. After claiming a couple of times that City bonuses were £21bn (e.g. On 22 August and again on 15 September) -- a claim which I pointed out at the time was erroneous -- in today's column we get:

When the trade minister Ian McCartney told MPs to fork out a day's pay for Farepak, he should have turned on the City's £8.8bn bonuses instead.

With no blush at the misplaced £12bn. Such is the contempt she has for the facts and for her readers.

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However, it is not all about former errors corrected. She also writes:

Here are families from the 30% who own nothing... They will never own a home like the 70% majority...

She's made this claim before, and it was as wrong now as it was then.

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She also asks:

Why has Ed Balls just promised banks they will never be windfalled despite soaring profits (HBOS £2.6bn, HSBC £6.7bn - thanks to consumer debt of £1.25tn)?

You'll note that these figures are actually half-year and not full-year profit figures, according to the, er, *Guardian*.

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She also writes that:

The director Nick Gilodi-Johnson, the son of Farepak's owner, had an estimated share dividend from the parent company EHR of £445,000, on top of his pay, and stands to inherit £75m.

If you're wondering how Farepak has both an owner and a parent company, wonder no longer. Bob Johnson (Nick's father) *founded* the company but no longer owns it. We can be sure of this, because he died in 2001.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2006

Inaccurate précis

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

The Nuffield's eminent group of professors of law, medicine and ethics drew up the guidelines...

The group was actually wider than this. It also included campaigners, a doctor of social anthropology, a health economist, and a solicitor.

She also says that:

They recommend that babies born before 23 weeks should not be resuscitated, as only 1% of these survive and a high proportion of those will suffer severe disabilities. Between 23 and 24 weeks the prognosis is poor - most die and two-thirds of the survivors end up disabled - but they say parents should make the final decision. Once a baby reaches 25 weeks, intensive care should normally be given, and half will live.

In fact, the report makes a very clear distinction between babies after 23 and 24 weeks. To quote from paragraph 23 of the executive summary:

(c) Between 24 weeks, 0 days and 24 weeks, six days of gestation, normal practice should be that a baby will be offered full invasive intensive care and support from birth and admitted to a neonatal intensive care unit, unless the parents and the clinicians are agreed that in the light of the baby's condition (or likely condition) it is not in his or her best interests to start intensive care. (d) Between 23 weeks, 0 days and 23 weeks, six days of gestation, it is very difficult to predict the future outcome for an individual baby based on current clinical evidence for babies born at this gestation as a whole. Precedence should be given to the wishes of the parents regarding resuscitation and treatment of their baby with invasive intensive care. However, when the condition of a baby indicates that he or she will not survive for long, clinicians are not legally obliged to proceed with treatment wholly contrary to their clinical judgement, if they judge that treatment would be futile

In neither of these scenarios do they say "parents should make the final decision" -- in (c) if the parents don't want treatment but the clinicians do, the paper will be offered "full invasive intensive care and support from birth". And in (d), if the parents want treatment, they point out that clinicians are not obliged to proceed -- "precedence" is given to the wishes of the parents, not final decision-making rights.

Worstall

November 17, 2006

Polly on Babies

Third comment:

So socialist toynbee advocates killing the handicapped to save money. Truly sordid.

crabby99

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2006

Present, if not correct

Today sees Polly's third appearance this month in the Corrections and Clarifications column, which picks up on my suggestion last Tuesday that Nick Gilodi-Johnson's father couldn't be the owner of Farepak, as he died over five years ago. It says:

We gave the impression in a comment article that the owner of Farepack is the father of Nick Gilodi-Johnson (The Farepack scandal lays bare a gross inequality, page 35, November 14).

His father Bob Johnson, who founded the company, died in 2001.

Farepack, you'll notice, rather than Farepak. Still, baby steps. Baby steps.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2006

Partial, and indeed partial

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes of Bolingbroke hospital that:

[i]t has a day hospital for some 15 elderly patients, with out-patients and imaging diagnostics.

This at best partial, it also provides a GP out of hours surgery, podiatry and community dental services.

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She also writes that:

...empty wards cost a fortune, not counting the heat billowing out, which can't be cut off in unused wings. St George's trust, which owns this hospital, has to pay a percentage on all its capital assets to the NHS, under an accounting system designed to ensure that assets are not underused...

Unused capital and land does of course incur a cost, and it is good to see this recognised. However, some empty wards are more costly than others.

One of the reasons people are upset about the planned closure of the Bolingbroke hospital is that the NHS trust spent around £2m refurbishing the hospital months before announcing its closure in 2005. It was at best economic with the truth when talking about the cost of the refurbishment, originally claiming it spent around £600,00. The refurbishment also failed to rectify fire hazards in the hospital, which had been known about since 1989 ([see, for example, this news story](#)).

This isn't to say that the hospital should close, of course. We all find ourselves susceptible to the sunk cost fallacy -- throwing good money after bad. It does, however, mean that there are legitimate concerns to be raised about the financial and managerial acuity of those involved in local healthcare provision.

For Polly to claim that opponents of the closure -- generally from people from political parties of which she doesn't approve -- are running "mendacious" local campaigns without actually citing a specific example of mendacity, and to decry this as "pure politics", seems, well, hypocritical.

When the eagles are silent, the parrots begin to jabber

Polly Toynbee was on the Today programme on Radio 4 this morning, being asked about Greg Clark's suggestion, reported in the *Guardian*, that she should replace Churchill as the inspiration for the Tory party's view of the welfare state. She said that people were sick of:

the city paying themselves a 28% pay increase this year and year after year after year

[\(You can hear the interview via the Today website. She was interviewed at about 8:47am this morning\).](#)

To what can she have been referring? Certainly not pay in the city -- that only went up by 13% (source).

Maybe she means the pay of directors of FTSE-100 companies. According to the *Guardian*, this did indeed

go up by 28% this year, but not "year after year after year" as, to quote the same Guardian article:

The previous year directors' pay rose 16%, following rises of 13% and 23%.

It is troubling that Greg Clark was impressed by her "effective analysis".

Worstall

November 21, 2006

Appollonia

Polly asks:

Does that include the right to make the wrong choice?

Yes, it's called freedom.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2006

At least the notoreity hasn't changed her

Polly Toynbee writes on CommentisFree that:

In 1979 14% of children lived below the poverty line: that rose to 33% by 1996.

Sadly, these two figures come from two inconsistent sources -- the Family Expenditure Survey and the Family Resources Survey -- and cover different geographies -- the UK and Great Britain.

Lies, damned lies, and...

On 19 February 2001, the *Guardian* carried an extract from Polly Toynbee and David Walker's book "Did Things Get Better?" which said:

A quarter of the 4m poor children have been lifted out of poverty.

On 29 October 2004, Polly wrote that:

Through tax credits, most experts agree, a million children have been lifted out of poverty

which is admirably consistent, though displays a troubling lack of progress over the three and half year between the two articles. On 10 March 2006, Polly Toynbee wrote:

700,000 children have been lifted out of poverty since 1998

Which worryingly suggests things were getting worse. On 7 July 2006, she wrote:

The first quarter-way target was missed as 700,000, and not a million children, were lifted out of poverty.

Apparently someone must have inadvertently given the impression that a million children had been lifted out of poverty. On 27 September 2006, she wrote of:

800,000 fewer poor children

Which at least suggests a resumption of progress. However, in yesterday's column, we're back to:

But by stealth Labour has lifted 700,000 children above the poverty line

Confused? You may not be the only one...

[I am in the debt of Xobbo, whose comment on yesterday's CiF column gave a hint that something was awry...]

Worstall

November 23, 2006 !!!!!

More on Appollonia

Free Born John takes a very different view of Polly's concern for the poor.

One thing, and one thing only, keeps people trapped in the kind of poverty of mind where they don't feed their children properly even when they could, and shit in their own stairwells. It's a lack of ownership; a lack of self-reliance. It's a lack of the very concept of self-reliance. It's an idea that the mere thought that they should be self-reliant is immoral, evil, callous and cruel. And though this idea is gibbered out by halfwits like Norman the carpet, it actually derives from Polly Toynbee.

Not just Toynbee, of course, but she has made a particular fetish of "social exclusion". And she claims that

...growing inequality multiplies all these problems

No, it doesn't. What multiplies them is continued state intervention in and control over these people's lives. They shit in stairwells because they don't own the stairwells and they don't feel responsible for keeping them clean. The same people will complain that the council are slow to disinfect them, before they shit in them again.

Worstall

November 23, 2006 !!!!!

Polly Takes It Further

Having been praised Polly decides to up the stakes.

What would it take to cut relative poverty? Most of the poor are in work, so first they need a minimum wage families can live on: if you eat in a restaurant where the dish washers can't support their children, then the price of the meal is too low. That means we all need to pay more for our services to pay living wages. Will the Tories accept that?

It needs higher tax credits and benefits too. Then it might mean giving everyone as a right their own home, once they have money to pay for the upkeep: that gives freedom and assets to borrow against for their children.

Mmm. A higher minimum wage eh? We know that (at some point at least, for the doubters) this will mean fewer people have jobs and we're also certain that it will reduce the number of hours offered. How does this increase incomes? Note that while she calls for higher tax credits and benefits, she still can't quite bring herself to call for lower actual taxation of low wages.

And did you see that last one? Everyone should be given a free house? Can you imagine the effect on

incentives? If you're this poor you can have this £100,000 house. If you're just this much richer than that you can't?

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2006

Not "all there"

Polly Toynbee was on BBC1's *Question Time* last night, and she said:

We saw child poverty in this country -- and this is all there in this document -- go from 14% in 1979 to 33%

[you can watch it online here -- quote comes at about minute 38]

She's used these figures before, of course, without noting the inconsistency between the two series from which the numbers are taken. However, it's not "all there in this document" which actually says:

The growth of child poverty on the relative measure was particularly alarming, with a rate of 12% in 1979 rising to 27% by 1992.

Marred

A couple of fellow bloggers – Mr. Eugenides and Not Saussure -- were kind enough to think of me when they read a BBC profile of Polly Toynbee, which included this quote:

Her editor at the Indie was Andrew Marr, a firm Toynbee admirer.

"What makes her stand out as a journalist is not only her strong views," he says, "but also her ferocious appetite for research. In a media world in which too many media columnists simply voice their top-of-the-head opinions, Polly always arrives heavily armed with hard facts."

Regular readers of this blog know, of course, that Polly Toynbee is sloppy with facts, and that she often doesn't read the research she cites. Take, for example, the following "hard" fact.

During her appearance on *Question Time* last Thursday (video link available here at the time of writing), Polly Toynbee said:

He [Rupert Murdoch] owns over 40% of the readership of the press in this country. [The quote comes at about about 54m00s in the clip]

Now, *The Economist* puts the figure at 32%. The Audit Bureau of Circulations claims that *The Times* and *Sun* have a readership of 656,278 and 3,107,412 respectively, out of a total of 12, 159, 237 -- or 31%. For the Sundays, the relevant figures are 1,287,099, 3,445,459 and 13,081,023 respectively -- or 36%. [Note that the ABC website can provide the data, but there is no way to link directly to the results.]

So Murdoch "owns" 31% of daily readership and 36% of Sunday readership for national papers -- call it 32% as a weighted average. And note that these are overestimates; it excludes the hundreds of thousands of local paper readers.

Maybe by "hard" facts, Marr meant facts that are difficult to understand...

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2006

Meme a little meme of me

Tom Papworth wants to know ten things I would never do, but doesn't think I'll answer. Let me try and boost that self-esteem.

1. Trust anything Polly Toynbee says at face value (obviously)
2. Ignore facts when trying to make up my mind on difficult issues
3. Assume that logic is the only way of persuading people of something
4. Respect people who make accusations and then change the subject when they are challenged to produce evidence
5. Think I have all the answers
6. Stop getting angry when I read factual inaccuracies in the press -- anywhere in the press, but especially in organs I respect
7. Forget that quote attributed to Keynes: "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"
8. Shrug my shoulders, grin and bear it when others' selfishness inconveniences me
9. Be able to withstand a determined and well-informed charge of hypocrisy
10. Pass on this meme to others.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2006

Ferocious indigestion

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

Yesterday, promoting their latest survey of 87 top executives, the CBI said two-thirds complain about tax. Only two-thirds? Who are the one-third who are happy with their taxes? The CBI claims the UK's "burdensome and expensive" tax system is a major factor for the 20% of firms that shifted some operations abroad and the 30% considering it. Again, what's surprising is that they could drum up only a third of executives willing even to "consider" moving bits of their business abroad.

If you look at the actual CBI research, you'll see that the "20%" should be 22%, and that there is overlap between the 22% and the 30% (see page 6 of the report) -- one of the reasons that there were 'only' 30% willing to consider moving operations overseas is that 9% have already moved operations overseas and are not contemplating further moves.

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Polly also writes that:

These days most shares belong to ordinary citizens via their pension funds, so it's hardly surprising that people are shocked at so much money all but stolen from public companies at the top.

It's good to see that she's starting to qualify some of the outrageous exaggeration – only last month it was not "all but stolen" but actually "stolen", and not "most" shares but "all".

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She also writes that:

Explosive boardroom pay increases and bonuses distort pay structures, fracturing any sense of proportion or just reward. FTSE CEOs helped themselves to 30% more this year, while their directors took 28% (against an average pay rise of 2.8%). They now earn at least 76 times the average pay of their staff, when in 1980 it was just 10 times.

The 30% figure comes from Watson Wyatt (this will be important later on), though let's just note for now that it is not FTSE CEOs but FTSE-100 CEOs. The 28% figure comes from the *Guardian's* own research, and refers to last year not this year, but who is going to argue with someone who has a "ferocious appetite for research" and yet can't be bothered to talk to her colleagues? Oh, and the *Guardian* article referring to the research talks of average earnings increasing at 3.7% a year rather than 2.8%.

Now, she then goes on to say that:

But where is the party to tell them this has to stop? ... [I]n his Today programme interview, [Cameron] said: "I don't think we're going to make the country a happier or better place by capping David Beckham's salary." But David Beckham is not the point. His highly marketable skills are on competitive display: his value matches his goals (and so is steadily falling). But there is no objective measure of the worth of directors and CEOs

Now, if Polly actually did have a ferocious appetite for research, as Andrew Marr claims, she would have looked at last year's Watson Wyatt research (told you it would become important). It revealed that:

chief executives' total remuneration has fallen on average by 7 per cent to £2.1m because the value of their long-term incentives has in many cases been reduced.

Why? Because, according to Watson Wyatt:

Shareholders have understandably been keen to use performance conditions to ensure that the long-term incentives offered to executives are paid out on their actual performance rather than fortunate market conditions. But the performance measures they have imposed have in some cases reduced the real value of the incentives to the executives.

It's almost as if there were a measure of the worth of a CEO -- the performance and arguably health of their company -- and that their pay sometimes falls. Gosh!

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She also writes of some research by Nick Isles:

Asked why they are paid so much, the conventional answer is that they suffer more risk on their precarious perches, or that they work in a global market that sets their pay rates. Isles blew the last reason out of the water in his previous research: the global market is a myth, our CEOs are mostly not only homegrown, but promoted from within their firms, and no global market clamours for their talents.

The Isles report she is referring to is called Life at the top: the labour market for FTSE 250 chief executives (pdf link here). Polly refers to this a lot but doesn't actually like citing it, leaving that to others, those who actually do have a ferocious appetite for research. What the Isles research shows is that:

The majority [of FTSE-250 CEOs] – nearly 60% – have been with their company for eight years or more. The vast majority of these individuals have moved up the ranks, at least to some degree. A further 6% have been with their firm for between three and eight years, and the remaining 38% have been with their company for three years or fewer.

All right, so not all are brought in from outside, but a non-trivial proportion are relatively new to the company. Three years or fewer in a company before being CEO is hardly working your way up through the ranks. As for "homegrown", the Isles research says:

the vast majority – 86% – are UK citizens.

This is hardly the same as homegrown (Robert Maxwell, anyone?), but we'll let that slide.

Consider for a moment the idea that because so few CEOs are foreign citizens and that almost 60% of them have been with their firms for over 8 years, it can be concluded that there is no global market effect determining their wages. This is tantamount to saying that because city dealers can't have any effect on property prices in London, because there are so few city dealers who buy property. It just doesn't wash.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2006

"Armed with hard facts"? More like a discarded sword of truth someone left lying around

I hate to once again bring up Polly Toynbee's column on Tuesday, and in particular this quote:

FTSE CEOs helped themselves to 30% more this year, while their directors took 28% (against an average pay rise of 2.8%). They now earn at least 76 times the average pay of their staff, when in 1980 it was just 10 times.

I have already addressed the figures in the first sentence, but take the second one. She used these figures before, for example on 7 July, 2006, when she wrote:

The Work Foundation points to these hard figures: in 1980 top directors in FTSE companies were paid 10 times the average worker in their companies. By 1990 the gap had multiplied to 31.5 times. And by 2002 the top dogs were paid an enormous 75.7 times more than their average employee.

I picked this up at the time and pointed out that the figures she referred to looked not at the pay of all directors, but only the highest paid for each company. I also said that:

it is not "the average worker in their companies", rather it is the average of "full-time manual employees in the UK." [emphasis added, source is the article I mentioned above].

Now, the average of all manual workers pay is different from the average pay of people working in a FTSE-100 company, as I am sure the employees of, say, 3i or Barclays or Schrodgers will be able to confirm.

I was delighted to find confirmation of my theory in this, er, *Guardian* column of 2 October, 2006 which says:

The best-paid [FTSE-100] workers are at London-based financial groups. Top of the pile is venture capital specialist 3i which paid its staff an average of £174,625 each last year

3i, eh? Who'd have thought it? Any guesses, by the way, on the discrepancy between the average pay of a manual worker in the UK and £174,625? Would Polly not be the first to claim it was massive?

Incidentally, there are two other problems in Polly's use of full-time manual employees in the UK as a proxy for FTSE-100 staff. The *Guardian* article points out that:

At the other end of the scale is Kazakh copper mining company Kazakhmys, now listed in London, where the average salary of its 64,000 miners is just over £2,000 a year. The British company with the worst-paid employees is retail chain Next, whose staff - many of whom are part-time - earned an average £10,306.

So basically, she is using the pay of full-time manual workers in the UK as a proxy for a workforce which is not all full-time, not all manual and not all in the UK.

Bravo!

Something about privilege down the ages

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes of:

the old media ownership laws that Margaret Thatcher discarded to allow Murdoch to acquire his hegemonic 40% of all newspaper readership

She's done the Murdoch/40% statistic before, of course, and so have we.

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She also writes:

At the very least, this is the time to make the pathetic Press Complaints Commission a statutory body. Sir Christopher Meyer has not noticeably been in hot pursuit of the other 300 journalists identified by the information commissioner. His "self-regulation" means that in the past six months, out of 1,681 complaints, the commission only deemed 13 fit to be adjudicated - and only five were upheld.

The figures are here. They are not for the "past six months", of course, but rather for April to September. But more interesting is the implication should the PCC should have been adjudicating on more of the 1,681.

Should it perhaps have pursued the 472 cases outside its remit (e.g. those relating to advertising material)?

Should it have pursued the 592 cases were a complainant made an initial contact with the PCC and then failed to take their complaint any further? Should it perhaps have ignored the 291 instances where an offer of remedial action was made by the editor concerned?

Or would that just make it more difficult to distort the facts?

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She also writes:

the BBC risks losing £1.6bn if it only gets a rise of inflation or below, despite bearing the whole cost of turning the country digital.

I look forward to finding out to whom in the BBC I should apply to get a refund for my digital set-top box. Or my digital radio. And doubtless the rapacious Mr Murdoch will be claiming back from the BBC the cost of BSkyB's investment in digital broadcasting equipment.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 01, 2006

Mea culpa

I am embarrassed to admit that yes, I did indeed quote circulation figures to refute Polly's claim about readers. *Mea culpa*. I was wrong.

Readership figures for most major newspapers can be found here. I do not have time right now to re-do the calculations, but suggestions in the comments of previous posts suggest that the 40% figure is still wrong, but not as wrong as I claimed. (I would note that the NMA site does not include figures for the *FT*, the *Scotsman* or *Herald*, though of course this is unlikely to affect the outcome significantly.)

Thank you to those who pointed out the error, and thanks to everyone who thinks that factual accuracy is necessary for credibility.

UPDATE

Once again, thank you to everyone who pointed out that when I took Polly to task for saying that Murdoch owned more than 40% of the press readership in this country, I used circulation rather than readership.

The readership data from the Newspaper Marketing Agency's website seem to look like this for daily papers:

Daily Mail	5,260,000	20%
Standard	794,000	3%
Daily Express	1,760,000	7%
Daily Star	1,498,000	6%
Guardian	1,171,000	4%
Independent	769,000	3%
Daily Mirror	3,652,000	14%

<i>The Times</i>	1,781,000	7%
<i>The Sun</i>	7,806,000	29%
The Telegraph	2,002,000	8%
Total	26,493,000	100%

And like this for the Sundays:

Mail on Sunday	6,161,000	20
Sunday Express	1,980,000	6
Daily Star Sunday	913,000	3
The Observer	1,471,000	5
Independent on Sunday	762,000	2
Sunday Mirror	4,123,000	13
The People	1,874,000	6
<i>The Sunday Times</i>	3,532,000	11
<i>News of the World</i>	8,242,000	27
Sunday Telegraph	1,867,000	6
Total	30,925,000	100

In summary, therefore, News International accounts for 36.2% of the readership of the dailies and 38.1% for the Sundays, or 36.46% on a weighted average basis. Polly claimed it was over 40%, I claimed it was 32%. It is interesting that the truth lies almost exactly in the middle. (Though these figures do exclude the *FT*, the *Scotsman* or *Herald*, and the multitude of local papers -- which would tend to lower the actual figure.)

I am, of course, embarrassed to have made the mistake. As a result, I remain convinced that citing sources is helpful when writers quote figures -- apart from anything it helps the reader to check what they are reading.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 05, 2006

A little Miss Tree

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

Think of Easter Island and the history of its destruction, recounted by Jared Diamond in his book Collapse. The Easter Islanders became so obsessed with their own status symbols, the moai - the mighty stone statues for which their island is famous - that in erecting them they destroyed every tree that made life on the island sustainable, competing clan against clan in statue-building. They starved when there was no wood left to build canoes for fishing.

When Thor Heyerdahl visited in the mid-1950's, there was still a tree on Easter Island living, a toromiro, so not every tree was destroyed, according to, er, Jared Diamond. In addition, it is clear that there was a substantial drop in population on Easter Island, but life did not stop being sustainable -- as of 2002, there were 2,269 Rapanui (the native Polynesian inhabitants) living on the island.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 06, 2006

Hot air

In a Comment is Free post today, Polly Toynbee writes:

Apparently Arnold Schwarzenegger drives his own Humvee in San Francisco - but it runs on hydrodogen - so size may not always matter.

It is nice to see a source, particularly as it makes the debunking that much easier. According to the *Forbes* article that Polly refers to:

*Hummer's parent, **General Motors** (nyse: GM – news -people), owns the H2H*

So it's not his own. Neither does he drive his own three (non-hydrogen) Humvees that often, according to AP:

Since the election, Schwarzenegger has reduced his fleet from seven Hummers to three, and he rarely drives any of them, spokeswoman Terri Carbaugh said.

'My Hummers are now in the garage, because I get driven by the CHP all the time,' the governor said.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 08, 2006

Wealth OK, income not; accumulate but don't earn

In today's column (can't seem to find it online yet.UPDATE it is nowhere) Polly Toynbee writes:

Meanwhile the annual Rich List this week will show runaway wealth at the very top jumping up another 18.4%. (Maybe that's modest for self-made stars and private entrepreneurs, when the real scandal is CEOs of top public companies paying themselves 30% more this year.)

The 18.4% increase in "runaway" wealth comes from the *Sunday Times* Rich List, and represents £63bn (source). The 30% increase for CEOs is actually FTSE-100 CEOs, and represents an average increase of about £0.9m each, that is £90m total.

Sorry, but *which* one is the real scandal?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2006

Something rotten

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

...if they [the Tories] regain power, they will at least be embarrassed if child poverty soars as it did last time (from one child in nine in 1979 to one in three by the time they left office).

The last two times we had figures from Toynbee about child poverty in 1979, it was 14%, which is one in seven, and not one in nine.

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She also writes:

Tax credits are indeed a problem: why should the taxpayer subsidise low-paying employers? But naturally the party that opposed the minimum wage does not draw the obvious conclusion — that if earnings rose there would be no need for state subsidy...

[O]ne fact is conveniently missing from these reports: Denmark has exactly the same proportion of one-parent families and the least child poverty in the EU.

Talking of conveniently missing facts:

Denmark has no statutory minimum wage.

According to Minister for Employment, Claus Hjort Frederiksen.

Worstell

December 12, 2006

Polly and Duncan

Yes, Polly's talking about the Duncan Smith report.

One point:

Labour finds that hard to discuss but at least it brought in a minimum wage and tax credits to fill the gap.

...

Denmark has exactly the same proportion of one-parent families and the least child poverty in the EU. Good social policy trumps moralising.

As Factchecking P points out:

Denmark has no statutory minimum wage.

So, that raises to two the number of Scandinavian countries that do not have a statutory minimum wage. And if we are to be more like the Scandinavians, as Polly insists, perhaps we should follow suit?

But, though his policy group calls itself Social Justice, not a word here concerns the yawning inequality between the top and the bottom.

OK, good Polly, you're calling it by the correct name. Inequality.

Even though Oliver Letwin's pledge to endorse Labour's promise to abolish child poverty by 2020 was later downgraded to an "aspiration", it means that, if they regain power, they will at least be embarrassed if child poverty soars as it did last time (from one child in nine in 1979 to one in three by the time they left office).

Ah, now you're switching again. If you're talking about absolute poverty, then indeed, you can call it poverty. But you're not. You're talking about relative poverty: that is, inequality. Language is important (yes, I realise that's a dangerous statement to make, lets all sorts of PC nonsense in), it's rather like Brown's constant use of 'investment' as a synonym for current spending. They aren't the same thing and it's a political and linguistic trick to insist that they are. So with inequality and poverty.

Take their headline message - marriage. The facts do indeed show that single parenthood makes many families destitute. Mothers can rarely earn enough to lift their families out of poverty. But don't expect an analysis of why women's work is so badly paid.

I'm entirely willing to offer one if you should wish. Value is set by scarcity. If there are tens of millions both able and willing to scrub toilets then the pay for scrubbing toilets will be low. No, that isn't to suggest that scrubbing toilets is women's work, just that the going rate for any job will depend at least in part on how many there are capable and willing to do it in relation to how many people are desired to do it.

That mothers cannot earn enough to lift families out of poverty might actually be something to do with the fact that they can face 90% marginal tax and benefit withdrawal rates as well.

I will admit that her criticism of 'supporting marriage' as a solution makes great sense. It's almost as if she read Chris Dillow before composing the piece.

With tax credits, poor parents don't pay tax and certainly not enough to deduct two personal allowances from one salary.

Unfortunately they do. That's what causes the huge and extremely damaging marginal tax and benefit withdrawal rates. One damn good solution is to raise the personal and NI allowances massively, to something like £10 k a year. But that would mean less money for El Gordo to spend, wouldn't it?

Tax credits are indeed a problem: why should the taxpayer subsidise low-paying employers?

A reversal of climate change needs strong action by the state at home and abroad, especially in the EU; Tory shrink-the-state Euroscepticism can't do that. It needs admission that the damaged environment is a market failure; the Tories can't admit that.

Really? Apparently, according to Zac Goldsmith, writing in the, er, *Guardian*:

George Osborne, the shadow chancellor, speaking in Japan today, will describe environmental pollution as a market failure. "It is a classic case of what economists call an externality. Because the pollution is external to the market, polluting can make life easier, while the true cost is paid not by the polluter, but by everyone else." Given what we can expect if even the most conservative climate change predictions are accurate, failure to correct this market failure is not an option.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2006

Channelling Lionel Richie, strangely enough

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

But yesterday Hutton shook a threatening stick at those he regards as social-contract defaulters. He made a good case: one in 10 of those who draw jobseeker's allowance has spent six of the past seven years on benefits...

In fact, he talked about 12 per cent according to the, er, *Guardian*, which is a lot closer to one in eight, and is certainly not one in ten.

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She also writes:

As the City reaps its £9bn bonuses, that money fuels an ultrasonic house-price boom. It's bad enough around the country at 180% up in the past decade, but far worse in London.

That's now the second time we've seen the £9bn figure for City bonuses (first time on 14 November). We've also seen a £21bn figure for City bonuses twice (on 22 August and on 15 September). Pick enough numbers, one of them is bound to be right...

The 180% increase on house prices is the same number that Michael Portillo cites here, in a piece which also juxtaposes the £9bn/180% increase figures. According to the Halifax, though, the figure is 187%.

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She also writes:

Rents are sent sky high, making it impossible for the unemployed to lose housing benefit by taking a job. They will never own a shed in the capital as the gap yawns ever wider between the 70% homeowners counting untaxed winnings every month, while the rest and their children are consigned to social housing forever.

The prose seems a little mangled here, but the 70%-of-people are homeowners figure really does need to be decommissioned. The actual figure is that 70% of dwellings are owner-occupied, according to National Statistics. This is not the same thing.

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Compare and contrast, from today's column:

This social contract has mostly been kept by both sides under Labour.

and

Let's look at how the state breaks its side of the social contract.

Eh?

Worstall

December 19, 2006

Polly on Unemployment

Something a little confused here:

But let's keep this in perspective: there are only 100,000 of these hard cases, and the jobseeker's allowance is a pathetic £57.45 a week, not enough to survive on. I tried, and fell into unavoidable debt within weeks. Those in debt fear taking a job as loans sharks chase them once they start earning.

Loan sharks don't chase people who owe them money? But more basically, the unemployed don't get enough money. Possibly a fair comment.

Rents are sent sky high, making it impossible for the unemployed to lose housing benefit by taking a job.

The unemployed get too much money for it to be worth their taking a job. Also possibly a fair comment.

But put the two together, which Polly doesn't do, and what's the solution? More money or less?

I think that this gentleman would suggest that it is the abolition of the welfare state as we know it. A non-means tested income paid to all, irrespective of employment or not.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2006

Fantastic!

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes:

Thus Gordon Brown personally is well ahead of the three party leaders as "doing a good job". Blair's rating is -34, Cameron is -5 and Campbell -9.

The MORI research actually has Brown on zero -- it says:

Over two in five (42%) people say they are satisfied with Gordon Brown's performance with as many saying they are dissatisfied — giving a net satisfaction rating of zero. When Ipsos MORI last measured public approval of Gordon Brown in February 2006, 47% of the public said they were satisfied with his performance (5 points higher than now) and 36% dissatisfied (6 points lower than now).

Not that "well ahead" of -5, one could argue.

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She also writes:

Remember at the same point a year after becoming leader, Blair personally hit 30% approval while David Cameron is down on -5%.

The Labour leadership election was July 1994. By July 1995, according to MORI, satisfaction with Blair was at 51% and dissatisfaction at 24% -- a net approval of 27%, and not 30% on a directly comparable basis.

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She goes on to write:

The Cameron myth has cracks: he is not scoring well with women, and he is only ahead on traditional Tory turf - tax, crime, asylum; leading a little on health is his one break with tradition.

Maybe we would be wise to distrust people who peddle the "myth" that Cameron does well with women?

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Polly asks:

Why isn't Labour doing worse? It's the economy, stupid. Look at Ipsos Mori's end of year assessment and it is the one issue where Labour gallops a mile ahead. People are secure in work in the most prolonged growth since records began...

Yes, do look at the Mori research:

The December Economic Optimism Index stands at minus 27

Ahem.

In November 2006, MORI asked:

On balance, do you agree or disagree with the statement that "in the long term, this government's policies will improve the state of Britain's economy"?

39% agreed, 51% disagree.

Ahem.

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It is almost Christmas, and it is good to see the old favourites being dusted down and recycled again, like:

...the papers predict next year's house price rise at 7%, 10% or 15%. That means 70% of the population gloats daily over their rising wealth and good luck their parents never dreamed of. This is the true national lottery - and all home owners are winners.

We've seen the 70% of the population are homeowners before a number of times this year, and it is not true.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2006

No gift of accuracy or consistency for Xmas

In today's column, Polly Toynbee writes of:

Restore the laws limiting media ownership by any one magnate, abolished by Margaret Thatcher to let Rupert Murdoch acquire his empire, so that he now owns over 40% of the press plus ever more dominant Sky.

Thanks to my goof over circulation and readership, we've seen the results for both; News International has 32% of circulation and 36% of readership. Note, by the way, that these figures are for most of the national dailies and Sundays. They exclude the local press.

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She also writes:

Boasts about "inward investment" to Britain are often just a sign on the borders saying Britain for Sale

Strange; on 13 October she thought it was good news:

the latest UN figures for inward investment show that last year the UK attracted more inward investment than any other country. It was twice as high as America's, growing by 183% last year. Meanwhile, the OECD ranks the UK as one of the most attractive places for foreign direct investment. The World Bank rates the UK top of the EU for best business conditions.

Here is more good news for the CBI to stick in its pipe
[emphasis added]

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She also writes:

For decades there have been reliable measures of relative national happiness: countries with least inequality are the happiest. (Yes, the Nordics come top.)

According to the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2002* (handily reproduced at the indispensable NationMaster website), the country where the richest quintile accounted for the lowest share of national income was Slovakia, with 31.4%. Their net happiness score (i.e. the proportion of people who say they are happy less the proportion who say they are unhappy) was a pretty miserable 4% -- 45th of 50

countries listed.

The next most equal country was Belarus, with the richest 20% getting 33.3% of national income. Their happiness score was actually -8%! The third most equal country, Hungary, had the richest quintile with 34.4% of national income and a happiness score of a slightly more respectable 46%.

Shutters down

After eight enjoyable months, I'm going to mothball this blog. This is not because Polly Toynbee has suddenly started using real facts that she undersands -- on the contrary, her sloppiness and inaccuracy continue unabated.

No, rather it is because I want to do other things more than I want to do this.

This blog -- my first serious effort at concerted blogging -- was an experiment that was successful in many ways but also limiting in others. I'd quite like to write about a broader range of topics than Polly's columns, and would also like to express opinions. That won't work on this blog, which is after all about Polly Toynbee's misuse of facts. So, in order to give myself the time to do this, I'm going to stop posting here, and will write elsewhere under a different guise.

I'm glad I've done this. I don't see this as embarrassing juvenalia to be forgotten, but rather a successful first endeavour which has taught me a lot, introduced me to some humbly good bloggers, and has given me plenty of food for thought about what I should do next.

There is more below the break, but for those who are stopping here, thank you for reading.

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My lowlights

The biggest has to be the two times when I've goofed. The first was back in June, when bizarrely one could have said "six months ago, Labour were ahead by 10% in the polls" and "six months ago, Labour were behind by 9% in the polls" with equal accuracy, and I thought that quoting the latter was enough to disprove the former -- though it genuinely was an occasion when two contradictory statements were both true. The second was when I mistook newspaper circulation and readership, and as a result was only as inaccurate as Polly Toynbee.

Another lowlight has been some poor debating on the web, be it the bafflingly thick Neil Harding's argument that I must be right-wing because I criticise Polly Toynbee, Cassilis's characterisation of refuting the statement that "social mobility has come to a halt" by citing academic research that people born into the lowest income quartile have a better than 60% chance of escaping that lowest income quartile as "semantic hair-splitting", or the folks who stumble across the blog, look around for a few minutes, leave a sarcastic comment and then disappear without caring if there is a reply.

And the final lowlight has to be the *Guardian's* Corrections and Clarifications column, which does not "correct significant errors as soon as possible", and in fact ignores many errors which are brought to its attention.

My highlights

I fully accept that this is a profoundly unoriginal insight, but the internet is a phenomenal research tool. I have said in my profile that "I've learned a lot by reading the research that [Polly] skims", and it's true. There is a wealth of interesting work, research, information and data which is out there which is waiting to be found by anyone with a browser, broadband connection and a familiarity with Google. And, *nota bene* Polly, intellectual curiosity.

I've also been thoroughly impressed by fellow bloggers. Despite my comment above about poor debating on the web, there are enough writers out there who are informative, entertaining and thought-provoking to make it a fascinating medium, as well as some very good writers.

And on a purely personal note, a big highlight was discovering that Ken Livingstone had paid Polly Toynbee £7,000 of taxpayers' money in a non-competitive tender to rehash some of her old *Guardian* columns. That money came partly from me; the re-hash including some particularly misleading distortions of some academic research; and Polly Toynbee is quite an overt flatterer of Ken's. Until discovering that, I was prepared to accept that she might just be careless and sloppy in her use of facts. After discovering that, I think her morally bankrupt.