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Reaping the whirlwind

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You couldn't avoid doing a double-take when you read it.

Karen Matthews, mother of the missing schoolgirl Shannon who thankfully was discovered alive and well a few days ago, referred to her daughter and one of her other six children as 'twins'. These children are actually aged nine and ten.

But Ms Matthews says they are twins because she thinks that's what you call children who have the same father. With seven children by five different men, she seems to have no idea of what having the same father actually means.

This little vignette is as frightening as it is illuminating. It reveals not merely ignorance of some pretty basic facts about reproduction. Far worse, one of the most fundamental and universal features of human society - the connection between children and their fathers - is something which Ms Matthews does not appear even to register.

Cases like this expose the lethal hole at the heart of our society. There has been a great deal of criticism of Ms Matthews's household arrangements, as well as the 'unconventional' lifestyle of Fiona MacKeown, mother of the 15-year-old girl murdered in Goa, who produced nine children by five different fathers.

Both women have been portrayed as irresponsible or feckless mothers. Now there's a backlash with people saying they should not be blamed.

But why not? Here are no fewer than 16 children (one of whom now tragically lies dead) who have been exposed to harm, risk, emotional neglect and worse as a result of the gross irresponsibility of their mothers and fathers.

Ms Matthews has been denounced as an unfit parent by her own mother, who has claimed that Shannon and her siblings have suffered an awful life at the violent hands of Ms Matthews's current boyfriend in residence, Craig Meehan — a charge he has strenuously denied. Ms MacKeown, meanwhile, has subjected her children to the anarchy of a hippy lifestyle.

Herself a cannabis smoker, her eldest son has a serious drug habit and mental health problems; while her murdered daughter Scarlett's diary has revealed a confused and distressed child who was regularly stoned on drugs and got 'stressy' if she went two days without sex.

Yet Ms MacKeown also deserves pity as a mother grieving for her murdered daughter. And who could not sympathise with the joy and relief of Karen Matthews at finding her child alive and well?

These women have feelings no less than anyone else, after all. The problem is that these feelings have been channelled into the most twisted tributaries so that the very essence of love - putting the interests of someone else first - and the disciplines of everyday life that are essential to safeguard those interests, are to them a closed book.

The reasons this has happened go far beyond mere criticism of individuals. For these events reveal the existence of an underclass which is a world apart from the lives that most of us lead and the attitudes and social conventions that most of us take for granted.

But it is an underclass which affluent, complacent, materialistic Britain has created.

An underclass composed of whole communities where committed fathers are so rare that any child who actually has one risks being bullied. Where sex is reduced to an animal activity devoid of love

or human dignity, and boys impregnate two, three, four girls with scarcely a second thought.

Where successive generations of women have never known what it is to be loved and cherished by both their parents throughout their childhood. How can such women know how to parent their own children?

These children are simply abandoned in a twilight world where the words 'family' or 'relatives' lose all meaning, as the transient men passing through their mothers' lives leave them with an ever-lengthening trail of 'step-fathers' or 'uncles' who have no biological connection with them whatsoever.

Shannon has been found; but, tragically, with a background of such emotional chaos she will remain a lost child.

Scarlett's mother, meanwhile, still sees nothing wrong in having left her cannabis-smoking teenager in Goa, in the care of strangers in an area known for its druggy circles.

To many of us, all this is hard to comprehend. But then Ms MacKeown's whole lifestyle has been one from which the words responsibility or judgment have been excluded.

Our society has encouraged people to think they have an absolute right to live exactly as they want without anyone passing judgment upon them. You want lifestyle choice? This may be an extreme case, but what happened to 15-year-old Scarlett is the result.

Seventeen years ago, the alarm was first sounded about these problems by two sociologists, Norman Dennis and A.H. Halsey, who warned that the bonds of civilised society would eventually snap following the collapse of the traditional family.

From that moment, well-heeled liberals denounced and vilified not just these academics but anyone who similarly pointed out that, in general, children in fractured families suffered harm in every area of their lives.

Those who went to such lengths to suppress this truth are the very same people who are complaining today that criticism of Ms Matthews and Ms MacKeown is unfair.

They are people for whom the pursuit of adult desires is so all-consuming that they simply don't see the distress of the children or abandoned spouses or lovers who are the casualties of this free-for-all.

They are people who think it is altogether indecent to criticise parents for negligence - but that it is not indecent to abandon children to the chaos, distress and literally life-threatening environment of fatherlessness.

Indeed, even though fractured family life vastly increases the risk of abuse, violence and murder, our deeply irresponsible overclass has put rocket fuel behind its exponential growth through tax and welfare incentives. After all, Ms MacKeown was able to travel with her children to Goa in the first place only because she had been able to save £7,000 from her welfare benefits.

In that sense, it is indeed wrong to heap all the blame on women like her or, for that matter, the fathers of these poor children. The people who are really culpable are all those who, intoning the mantra of 'alternative lifestyle choice', have defeated every attempt to shore up marriage and the traditional family.

In its place, they have deliberately and wickedly created over the years a legal and welfare engine of mass fatherlessness and child abandonment, resulting in a degraded and dependent underclass and a lengthening toll of human wreckage.

To his great credit, David Cameron seems to have grasped much of this. He has consistently said he will support and promote marriage and has spoken strongly about the need for stable and secure family life, as he did once again at the Tories' spring conference over the weekend.

What a shame, therefore, that he had to spoil it. His proposal to extend child-care leave will be

unaffordable for many while putting businesses under even greater pressure — thus increasing the risk of throwing more parents out of work — just when chill economic winds are already blowing.

Both this and his breakfast photo-op at home with his children just seem to be examples of opportunistic gesture politics. But the reform of family life is far too important to be jeopardised by stunts like this.

Years of social engineering have brought the British family to its knees. Today, thousands of children, like the murdered Scarlett Keeling and the rescued Shannon Matthews, are paying the price.