

Has there been a decline in values in British society?

Viewpoint
Informing debate

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The JRF's recent public consultation revealed a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. This *Viewpoint* continues the discussion about modern 'social evils' on the theme of 'a decline in values'. Anthony Browne argues that, in the face of an unprecedented and unsettling decline in values, discussing the problem and its causes is the first step towards making things better.

Key points

- Our social values have changed rapidly. Things that caused outrage a generation ago are now celebrated, such as homosexuality and same-sex marriage. But Britons now have a widespread sense of a decline in morals or values.
- Panics about moral decline are experienced in every generation and most of them are shown to be ill-founded in the long-run.
- It seems that in almost all measurable ways (such as income and health) life is better now for Britons than it has ever been. Compared to one, two or three hundred years ago, our values too are almost incomparably better, with an increase in tolerance and fairness.
- There have been many moral improvements since the 1950s but there have also been declines. Family breakdowns, drug use, alcohol abuse, welfare dependency have all unequivocally increased in the last couple of decades, as has violent crime. A decline in social capital – the glue that binds society together – is also evident.
- Why there has been such a change is hard to determine, as changes in values often trail social changes, which are themselves driven by technological and economic changes. There is no single underlying and overwhelming cause but a whole barrage of smaller causes.
- Multiculturalism – a profusion of beliefs – tempered with moral relativism has been a major contributing factor, causing a clash of values.
- A second major factor in moral decline has been the decline of the family. The consequences of this – in terms of poverty, educational underachievement, and anti-social behaviour – are well known.
- A third major factor is the decline of individual responsibility, due to the growth of the rights-based culture and the inexorable growth of the state into every aspect of our life.
- Technology too has done its part in promoting individualism, eroding conversation and shared experiences.
- What can be done? Decline in values is unresponsive to legislation but changes of behaviour can be powerfully affected by a change in culture. By talking about it, we are taking the first step to making things better.

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Is there really a problem?

It has been said that a Victorian who fell asleep in 1848 wouldn't recognise his country if he awoke in 1851. Indeed, the three years up to the Great Exhibition were a time of rapid change. But a Victorian who woke up in early twenty-first century Britain would not only find their country unrecognisable, but would be profoundly shocked by it. They would be astonished obviously by the technical wizardry – the mechanised carriages racing along six-lane tarmacadamed highways, the towers of residential apartments soaring higher than any cathedral spire, the televisions and computers. They would be stunned probably by the social changes – the universal enfranchisement (even of young unpropertied women!), the demise of the peerage, the multiracial society.

But it is the change in values that would almost certainly perturb them most – the demise of marriage between heterosexual couples, and the existence of marriage between homosexual and mixed-race couples; the quarter of children living with just one parent; the millions of able-bodied people paid by the state to be idle; the disappearance of deference, even to the monarch; the empty pews on Sundays (and the full mosques on Fridays). Everything they hold most dear – the Christian God-fearing ethos, the family, marriage, the monarch and the value of hard work – would seem decimated.

Values change dramatically over a century, but they also do over decades. Things that caused outrage a generation ago are now celebrated. Until 1967, British men were imprisoned for having sex with other men; forty years later, gay marriage is enthusiastically covered in recently-homophobic tabloid newspapers. Even the Conservative Party, long seen as the bastion of 'traditional values', and which when last in power banned local authorities from promoting homosexuality, boasts two openly gay members in its shadow cabinet (one of whom has married his partner).

The speed with which our values are changing is highlighted by the fact that when ten mainly Eastern European countries joined the EU in 2004, European Commission officials said that their admission would have been unacceptable on human rights grounds if they hadn't legalised homosexuality. But when Ireland joined the EU in 1971, homosexuality was illegal in that country, and remained so until 1993. So what was an accepted legal practice in an EU country in 1993 became a reason to refuse entry by 2004. Nothing had changed in that decade – relevant EU law was the same, the European Convention on Human Rights was the same, and the European Court of Human Rights was the same. All that had changed is our shared values, the prism through which we interpret our laws.

Our values are changing sufficiently rapidly that they have altered beyond recognition within the course of a single lifespan. Attitudes to sexuality, lone-parenthood, marriage, race, welfare benefits, alcohol, drugs and violent crime have all been transformed. People are bound to be confused if the fundamental values they grew up with and internalised as a child, and used to guide their life, are ditched by society when they hit middle age.

People tend to see any change as threatening, since the psychology of problem-solving humans has evolved to quickly take for granted any positive changes, and to be angered by and repeatedly come back to any negative ones. An inevitable consequence is that quickly changing values – unless the changes are overwhelmingly positive – will lead to a widespread sense of decline.

There certainly is a widespread sense of decline. A poll conducted in 2007 for the BBC by ComRes found that 83 per cent of people believe that Britain is in moral decline, with only 9 per cent disagreeing. Nor was this just elderly people bathing in warming memories of their youths – the sense of decline was fairly constant across all ages, with 78 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds agreeing with the statement: "Britain is experiencing moral decline." In fact, the sense of moral decline was felt overwhelmingly across all social classes and all regions of the country, among those with jobs and those without them, among those who are married and those who are single. A separate study showed that 91 per cent of people thought that others showed a little less or a lot less respect for authority, while 89 per cent thought that anti-social behaviour had increased.

But while values change, panic about their decline is one of the constants of history. Panics about moral decline are experienced in every generation, almost as though there is a human need for them. The sixteenth and seventeenth century Puritans despaired of drama, dancing and games of chance. Charles Dickens declared of his era that 'it was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom and the age of foolishness.' Aldous Huxley wrote *Brave New World* out of fear of the lack of morals in the roaring 1920s. Since then, we have had moral panics about Teddy Boys, Mods and Rockers, Hells Angels, skinheads and hippies. And each panic turned out to be ill-founded – at least in the long run.

Frequently, problems that we consider new are in fact ever-present, just discovered anew by each generation. There is widespread concern now about feral youths, preying on decent society and living beyond the control of authority. But such youths were paraded throughout the pages of Dickens for a very good reason: they were far more common then than now. We worry now about mobs of hoodlums, but the phrase 'mob rule' was created because in centuries past mobs often did really rule our cities, to the extent that British history can often seem the history of riots. In the 1736 Porteous Riots, Tollbooth Prison was ripped open and its inmates let out; in the Wilkite Riots of 1768, every window in Mansion House was smashed; in the Gordon Riots of 1780, the Bank of England and Catholic chapels were attacked; and in 1914, German bakers' shops in the East End were attacked. Hogarth did not invent his scenes of violent disorder, and police really did have to 'read the Riot Act' to mobs.

The same is true of other issues, such as alcohol abuse. There is currently a moral panic sweeping Britain (or at least our newspaper pages) about excessive alcohol consumption and binge-drinking. Indeed, average annual alcohol consumption has nearly doubled since the Second World War, and alcohol abuse is a clear public health and public order problem. But on average Britons drink less now than they did at the end of the supposedly stern, righteous Victorian era. Alcohol consumption at the turn of the twentieth century was over 10 litres of pure alcohol per person per year, before dropping to 4 litres by the 1930s, and then rising again to 9 litres now. From medieval times to Victorian ones, Britain has been plagued by public drunkenness (the Puritans being so concerned they tried to abolish the public celebrations of Christmas, featuring as they did the bacchinalian Lord of Misrule).

Use of psychoactive drugs has also risen sharply in recent years – in 1996 only 0.6 per cent of the population had used cocaine in the past year, whereas now the figure is 2.4 per cent. But when Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote the mystical poem *Xanadu* in an opium-fuelled dream, use of (if not addiction to) laudanum was comparatively open and acceptable, not just among most of the Romantic poets but among the working classes (laudanum being cheaper than gin) and high society, up to and including Queen Victoria herself. In the twenty-first century we have a war on the drugs trade; in the nineteenth century we went to war to impose the drugs trade on the Chinese.

The study of cyclical moral panics has produced a whole genre of academic literature. In *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda anatomise three moral crusades to hit the US – the prohibition movement from 1900 to 1920, the anti-marijuana movement in the 1930s, and the sexual psychopath laws of the 1930s to 1950s.

The classic text, Stan Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, was written in 1972 and its thirtieth anniversary edition was updated with the case of the murder of Jamie Bulger in 1993 by two ten-year-olds, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. This triggered a prolonged wave of national moral panic, about a new breed of feral children, absent fathers and violent video games. *The Sun* newspaper called for 'a crusade to rescue a sick society', while *The Independent* declared that 'Britain is a worried country, and it has a lot to be worried about.'

In fact, in the grand scheme of things, if you step back and take a detached view, it is difficult to make a case for long-term decline. It is one of our open secrets, rarely admitted in public discourse, that in almost all measurable ways life is better now for Britons than it has ever been. We are healthier, wealthier, wiser (or at least better educated) and freer. By most measures, most people alive now are the most privileged that have ever lived. They are the first generation with no need to fear four things that have bedevilled earlier humanity: pestilence, famine, absolute poverty or tyranny.

Compared to one, two or three hundred years ago, not just our lives, but our values now are almost incomparably better, in the functional sense that the widely held abstract beliefs of society inflict less unnecessary misery on its members. Catholics have been emancipated, women liberated and the poor enfranchised. Children of unmarried parents and single mothers are no longer shunned, homosexuals no longer imprisoned, girls no longer left uneducated, black people no longer banned from shops, and poor people are no longer routinely left to die because of lack of basic care readily available to others. It is obvious but worth stating because we so readily ignore it: the historical increase in tolerance and fairness is definitely an unequivocal improvement in our values.

But people aren't comparing now to the nineteenth century, but to their own childhoods which they experienced first hand. Many clearly remember the 1950s, a comparatively crime-free era of strong communities and solid families (albeit with endemic homophobia, sexism, poverty and racism). It is the sense of decline in their own lifespan that causes concern.

Moral panics may be one of the constants of history, and may be a concern more of the right than the left, but it would be too simplistic to dismiss the concerns of 83 per cent of the population as paranoia fuelled by a scare-mongering right-wing media. As Cohen says in his introduction: 'Calling something a moral panic does not imply that this something does not exist or happened at all and that reaction is based on fantasy, hysteria, delusion and illusion.'

Clearly there have been many moral improvements since the 1950s, such as the rise of tolerance to those who are different, the continuing emancipation of women and the decline in the taboo about homosexuality and pre-marital sex. But many of these improvements have been banked, and are now taken for granted. It is the areas of decline – and there are plenty of them – that cause such concern.

A glance at the 2008 edition of *Social Trends*, published by the Office for National Statistics, will satisfy the most ghoulish of appetites. The number of people identifying dealing drugs as a local problem has doubled between 1992 and 2006, while the number of people worried about teenagers hanging around on the streets is up by half. Death rates from alcohol abuse have almost doubled since 1991. There are 32,000 children on the child protection register, and spending on social security (or spending on social failure, as one Labour prime minister put it) has almost doubled since 1978. Britain now has a record number of people in prison. That could be seen as a triumph of the criminal justice system in catching more criminals, but it is a clear indication of a broader failing as a nation.

Family breakdown, drug use, alcohol abuse and welfare dependency have all unequivocally increased in the last couple of decades, as has violent crime by some measures. For almost all of us, these things have got steadily worse in our lifetimes.

The growth of violent crime

While society has persistently been worried about yobbish male youths, we are now also worried about criminal girl gangs. Figures from the Youth Justice Board show that the number of crimes committed by girls aged 10 to 17 climbed from 47,000 in 2003/04 to 59,000 in 2006/07, a rise of a quarter in just three years.

In the *Daily Mail*, which has stories of moral decline on an almost daily basis, the columnist Melanie Phillips (12 May 2008) spelled out the almost Gothic horror behind the statistics.

Last month, rival [girl] gangs used snooker balls in socks to batter each other in a mass brawl at a railway station at Shoreham, in West Sussex. In March, a 15-year-old girl was jailed for using a mobile phone to film two drunken teenage male friends beating a man to death in Keighley, Yorkshire. Last October, a gang of teenage girls stoned a 72-year-old woman and forced her into a busy road, leaving her with a broken nose and two black eyes. There have also been a string of murders committed by girls, often sickeningly sadistic. In 1999, for example, two 15-year-old girls murdered 71-year-old Lily Lilley, binding her mouth so tightly that her false teeth were pushed down her throat and giggling as they wheeled her body through the streets before throwing it into a canal.

It is not just the media which is alarmed. The judiciary, teachers and the police frequently bemoan the state of our national morals. Judge Anthony Russell, in sentencing two youths who drunkenly kicked a gap-year student to death because "she was a Goth", said: "this was feral thuggery of a kind that is quite unacceptable. It raises serious questions about the state of the society which exists in this country at the beginning of the new millennium, which was heralded with such optimism."

The government keeps trumpeting the decline in property crimes – largely a result of the decreasing resale value of electronic goods – but statistics show violent crimes are sharply up in recent years, with those using guns and knives rising the fastest. Twenty years ago, gun crime in Britain was so unknown that a single incident of it would make front page news, but now it occurs daily. Home Office figures show that the number of people injured in firearm incidents rose from 864 in 1998/89 to 3,821 in 2005/06. Hospital admission figures show that assaults and injuries from knives and sharp implements led to 12,340 people going to hospital in England and Wales last year, a 19 per cent rise on five years ago. The number of children suffering stab wounds has nearly doubled from 95 in 2002/03 to 179 in 2006/07. In the first seven months of 2008, 31 teenagers have been shot or stabbed to death in Britain; by early July 2008, 18 teenagers had been stabbed to death in London alone, more than in all of 2007. Children openly tell newspapers that everyone they know carries knives for protection. Although flick-knives were popular in earlier decades, the knife culture now seems far more widely spread than earlier decades.

Victims' parents frequently blame the decline in values for their tragedy. In a BBC Radio interview, Richard Taylor, whose son Damilola was stabbed to death in a stairwell in a Peckham housing estate, said:

There is a breakdown of moral values in Peckham and some other areas of London. We are living in a world which requires discipline. If there is no discipline in society, things like this will become so rampant in society. We don't want it to deteriorate to a situation where everybody is carrying guns on the streets of London.

Barry Mizen, whose 16-year-old son Jimmy was killed with a shard of glass in a London bakery in 2008, said:

People are saying something must be done. I just wonder how futile it is with more and more legislation and laws. Perhaps we all need to look to ourselves and look to the values we would like.

The breakdown of the family

Most notably – and causing most concern – there has without doubt been a collapse of the traditional nuclear family that is unprecedented in history. This is true across Europe, but is most acute in the UK. We have the most broken families on the continent, by almost any measure. Fewer people get married than most other EU countries, and those who do are the most likely to get divorced – the UK has the highest proportions of marriages that fail (absolute divorce rates are not so bad only because fewer people get married in the first place). The UK has the highest proportion of single parent families in Europe, at 24 per cent. Our children are more likely to engage in under-age sex, and they are more likely to get pregnant.

The recent gushing over marriages coming back in fashion was shattered when the government introduced new rules to combat sham marriages undertaken to get around our immigration rules. The numbers tying the knot had been rising, but the clampdown on bogus marriages led to a sharp decline. Marriage was turning from a way of showing commitment to a way of evading the law.

There is particular concern about the state of our children. A report by the United Nations agency UNICEF found that young people in the UK are suffering greater deprivation, worse relationships with their parents, and are exposed to more risks from alcohol, drugs and unsafe sex than children in any other developed country. A study by the children's charity NCH found a doubling of emotional problems and conduct disorders among young people since the 1930s. One in ten children now have a mental health disorder to a 'clinically significant' level. Nearly one quarter of children live in official poverty, and they are more obese than before.

Mr Justice Coleridge, a senior family division judge in England and Wales, warned in a speech to Resolution, which represents family law solicitors, that Britain was gripped by an "epidemic" of family failure which would have catastrophic effects – in fact, it would be as bad as "terrorism, street crime or drugs." He said:

In some of the more heavily-populated urban areas of this country, family life is, quite frankly, in meltdown or completely unrecognisable. In some areas of the country, family life in the old sense no longer exists. So I suggest the general collapse of ordinary family life, because of the breakdown of families, in this country is on a scale, depth and breadth which few of us could have imagined even a decade ago.

The decline of social capital

What these statistics don't measure is the unease in people's lives; the pervasive sense that society is fracturing, that no one can trust anyone anymore, that there are no longer any shared values, that there is no respect and that strangers now have to be regarded as enemies rather than friends.

Social capital, the glue that binds society together, is a vague concept, but however you measure it there seems little doubt that there has, in recent years, been a decline. Society in the 1950s was riven by divisions, but it was more close-knit than now. The historian Francis Fukuyama, author of *The Great Disruption*, which charts the breakdown of social norms in the 1960s and 1970s, defines social capital as the 'set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permits co-operation among them. If members of the group come to expect that others will behave reliably and honestly, they will come to trust one another.' Its decline, he said, has led to family breakdown, rising crime and demise of shared values and trust.

Across left and right, few dispute that social capital has been receding. Robert Putnam, the liberal American sociologist, plotted the demise of social capital in the US with unnerving mathematical precision in his totemic book, *Bowling Alone*. With American capitalism in the dock, he flattered the prejudices of the British liberal-left and became an almost-instant intellectual poster boy. Later work, blaming the demise of social capital on our increasingly diverse communities, was met in contrast by stony silence (with the notable exception of David Goodhart, the free-thinking editor of *Prospect Magazine*.)

The unease about moral decline and social breakdown is more nebulous, but no less real, than the statistics charting the rise of substance abuse and violent crime and the decline of the family. Right-wing commentators and men of cloth now chart our social breakdown on an almost daily basis.

Dr John Sentamu, the Ugandan-born Archbishop of York, said that Britain had lost its way, warning that "the loss of purpose has led to a crisis in Britain and a crisis in Christianity. Britain is in a very, very uncomfortable place." The ever-controversial, Pakistan-born Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali, graced the pages of the launch edition of *Standpoint*, a magazine whose mission is to defend Western civilisation, with an article blaming the social and sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s for a moral vacuum which is destroying Britishness and the Christian nature of our country, and being filled by endless self-indulgence and radical Islam.

The crime author Baroness James, who writes as PD James and who used to work in the criminal policy department of the Home Office, in a speech on twenty-first century policing declared that there is now little that binds us to our fellow humans. "Our society is now more fractured than I in my long life have ever known it", she said.

Increasingly there is a risk that we live with a strong commitment to our local community, but little contact with those outside it. Mutual respect and understanding and recognition of our common humanity cannot be nurtured in isolation.

Why have our values changed?

The two big questions then are: why have our values changed, and what should, or can, be done about it? Changes in values often trail social changes, which are themselves driven by technological and economic changes; sometimes they reflect a decline in traditional elites which used values to uphold their status; sometimes values change simply as a result of increased knowledge. *When the facts change, I change my mind.*

Pre-marital or extra-marital sex was far more likely to have profound, negative consequences when there was no reliable contraception or welfare state. The taboo on it, upheld by real-life horror stories of ruined lives of those who strayed, helped preserve the social fabric by protecting people from the fruits of their passions.

Just as the invention of the contraceptive pill eroded the taboo on pre-marital sex, so the invention of sewerage systems and vaccines led inexorably to the abolition of the death penalty. When the majority of babies born died before their fifth birthday and when a virus could take anyone's life at any time, few people were troubled at the thought of the state killing a killer. Now that premature death is so rare, we deem it almost a right to live beyond the age of 70: we value life so much that it seems abhorrent for the state to kill, other than in a war fought in national defence (we now seem to expect that wars should be deathless, at least as far as our own soldiers are concerned, if they are not fought in clear national defence). Our Victorian friend would be shocked that even serial child murderers have a state-sanctioned right to life.

Sometimes, social and economic changes collide to reinforce a trend. The taboo of divorce has withered as it has become far more frequent, a result partly of the growing financial independence of women, partly of growing societal affluence, and partly of the increase in life expectancy. Financial independence means that women can now afford to leave their husbands, while growing affluence means that women no longer routinely marry men much older than themselves because older men are more financially secure. One estimate suggested that, in the absence of divorce, marriages now would typically last three times as long as Victorian marriages. It was easier to stick to your pledge of 'til death do us part' when young women tended to marry older men, and when death was ever-present. The change in divorce laws has both reflected the change in attitudes and accelerated them.

Changes in knowledge also change values. First-cousin marriage is still legal in the UK, but has in mainstream society become almost shameful, as we have become more aware of the medical dangers of consanguinity. Yet a century ago, it was so widely practiced among the aristocracy, as a way of preserving their familial status and wealth, that it was unremarkable when Queen Victoria married her first cousin Albert. The decline in concern about legalising homosexuality has been partly the result of the growing realisation that the fears about its consequences proved to be unfounded.

Mass education, and the ensuing mass literacy, has led to the passing of the age of deference, with people from ordinary backgrounds now willing to question and dispute with those to whom in earlier times they would have just listened to. This might be uncomfortable for elites, but this empowerment of the masses is an enormous strengthening of society as a whole (no longer can 'donkeys' lead 'lions' into battle, as they did in the First World War). The problem though is that the age of deference has swung to the other extreme of the age of cynicism, with large sections of society holding all authority in contempt.

There is no single underlying and overwhelming cause to the decline in social capital – the so-called ‘social recession’ – over recent decades. Rather, there has been a whole barrage of smaller causes, each chipping away at our once self-assured moral confidence. Each cause in itself is relatively insignificant, and each could on their own terms be welcomed, but combined they have so weakened our values and beliefs that we are now left with this pervasive anxiety. They are all partly the result of economic and social progress, and the continued reverberations of the Second World War.

Whether you look upon the sixties as a good decade or a bad one, there is no doubt that prior to it there was a commonly understood and assumed set of values that simply doesn’t exist now. Before then, you would with great certainty know the values of someone you just met before they opened their mouths. Not any more. The received moral orthodoxies that permeated 1950s society were undermined by the counter-cultural revolutionaries who deliberately set out to destroy the suffocating conventions and hierarchies, by making love not war, and by turning on, tuning in and dropping out.

Their path was smoothed by the decline of mainstream religion in our sceptical, know-it-all, believe-nothing scientific age. Even atheists like myself have to accept that organised religion helps provide a common set of beliefs that can effectively tie society together, adding to the social capital. People have a clear sense of what is right and what is wrong when a religious leader tells them every week. In highly religious societies, such as Middle-East Islamic ones, there can be such strong shared values that social capital can be very high (even if it hides many evils, such as high rates of domestic violence, and if some of their values, such as attitudes towards non-believers, are abhorrent to most twenty-first century Britons).

The decline of a unifying religious belief system was fuelled not just by the astonishing success of science at giving God-like powers to men, but by the rise of the television and the jumbo jet. While television effectively marketed the attractions of life in the Western parts of the world to the non-Western parts, the growing ease and falling cost of international transport made it possible for more people to live the dream. The

dramatic rise in immigration from the developing world to the developed world has turned a largely monocultural society to a multicultural one in the space of a generation. Belief in mainstream Christianity is challenged by exposure to so many other religions that also claim a monopoly on truth. There is no single religion unifying the country, but a supermarket of different religions competing cheek by jowl, each with its own and often startlingly different value system.

Instinctive classical and social liberals like myself find it astonishing that debates are being reopened on forced marriages, gay rights, violence against women and the rights and wrongs of sending Christmas cards. The profusion of beliefs has been turned poisonous by an unthinking moral relativism, which has taken the anti-establishment message of the 1960s to intellectually unsustainable extremes.

The flamboyant Dutch homosexual socialist Pym Fortuyn became enraged with his country’s capitulation to Islamic homophobes who succeeded in getting their children’s gay teachers sacked. After a generation fighting for equal rights, Dutch gays were losing them again. The clash between classical liberalism and moral relativism ended in the shooting of Pym Fortuyn (by a left-wing activist seeking to defend Islam) and the ritual slaughter of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh (by an Islamic radical), provoking what the Dutch prime minister dubbed a “maelstrom of religious violence” with mosque and church burnings.

The clash of values – and the lack of a new settlement in our de-facto multicultural age – turned the Netherlands from a proudly tolerant country into one violently nervous of itself and what it has become. The Netherlands was the most dramatic case, but most Western countries are facing similar issues. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 in New York and Washington (and those in Bali, Madrid and London), the incompatibility between moral relativism, multiculturalism and liberalism has sent shockwaves through the intellectual left, with writers such as Nick Cohen turning on their former comrades-in-arms, and Britain’s most prominent race campaigner Trevor Phillips using almost blood-curdling language about the need to ditch multiculturalism. These are very complex, very confusing times for any well-meaning citizen who just wants to get on with their life and get on with those around them. Robert Putnam coined the term ‘hunkering down’ to describe the defensive behaviour of people living in multicultural societies they don’t understand: they just cut themselves off from what’s going on around them, and mix only with people like themselves.

Believing little, Britons have been engorging themselves with a diverting but unsatisfying anti-intellectual obsession with celebrity and consumption. The psychologist Oliver James has pronounced that Anglo-Saxon countries are particularly prone to what he dubbed 'the Affluenza virus' – a set of values which increase our vulnerability to psychological distress: placing a high value on acquiring money, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous. These values, he says, increase our susceptibility to depression, anxiety, substance abuse and personality disorder, and prevent us from fulfilling basic human needs; in particular a sense of security, connectedness to others, authenticity and feeling competent. When a society prefers to relate to itself through the 'Big Brother' household, it is not surprising that it has profound problems.

Multiculturalism and moral relativism have little to do with the second major factor in our present social decline – the demise of the family. The causes of family decline, touched on earlier, range from the decline of religion to the very welcome rise in financial independence for women. The consequences – in terms of poverty, educational underachievement, and anti-social behaviour – are well known. The lack of a father figure, of a stable home environment, and of an inculcated sense of right and wrong, has set a large section of our youth adrift with nothing to hold on to except the feeling of belonging that gang membership gives them, and the short-lived high of earning fear-induced respect from others by waving a knife or gun. Shaun Bailey, the black youth worker and Conservative parliamentary candidate, explained the attitude on the street thus:

Power and the capacity to dominate and intimidate others is the only thing that matters: if you want something, you go and take it. Don't wait until you can pay for it. Get it now. If that means intimidating others into handing it over to you, that's what you need to do.

But there is a third major factor beyond moral relativism and the decline of the family that has led to moral decline. It is the decline of individual responsibility, of the feeling that we are each responsible for our actions, and responsible to other members of society. This has come about from the growth of the rights-based culture and the inexorable growth of the state into every aspect of our life.

The rights culture, which grew out of the wreckage of Europe after the Second World War, has a lot to commend it. Ultimately inspired by Britain's own Bill of Rights and enshrined in various international post-war treaties (the UN Convention on Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights), it was designed to stop dictatorships re-emerging by protecting individuals from the abuse of governments. 'Human rights' has progressed inexorably into an almost overwhelming legal doctrine, and has permeated almost every aspect of our culture. But these half-century old conventions are largely fighting yesterday's battles, not today's. The main threat to society is no longer from the actions of dictatorial governments, but from the actions of law-breaking individuals, whether violent criminals or terrorists. As almost every recent home secretary has found, human rights legislation makes it more difficult to fight these problems because it gives rights to those perpetrating them and limits the abilities of government to tackle them.

But more importantly, because of their original aim of limiting government abuse, human rights laws place no emphasis at all on the responsibilities of individuals. They tell all of us that we can have rights without responsibilities. A generation has grown up believing they have rights their predecessors could only dream of – such as freedom from physical punishment, the right not to be discriminated against on any grounds, free universal healthcare, or the right to receive benefits without having to work. At the same time, they don't think they have the responsibilities to others that their predecessors would have taken for granted – such as caring for elderly relatives, raising children in a stable environment, or working if you are able, even if it means doing jobs you don't like. It has encouraged an extreme solipsism, where people only think about their own concerns without thinking about the impact of their actions on society around them. People insist they have a right to be drunk in public (such as on the London Underground) without thinking about the problems that public drunkenness cause to others. This mass solipsism is corrosive for society, which is held together by mutual respect, consideration and collaboration. This solipsism is the antithesis of social capital.

The effect of the rights culture has been reinforced by other social changes which have withered away the sense of duty, not least the growth of the state. The relentless assumption of responsibilities by the state means that people feel less responsibility themselves than they once did. Children no longer feel that they have to make sacrifices looking after their parents because they know the state will do it. People don't feel it a duty to help vulnerable people because they know their taxes pay for public workers whose job it is to do that.

Perhaps most corrosive of all is the welfare culture, from the benefits system to social housing. It exists for a very good reason – to fight destitution – but it has unfortunately led to mass dependency, with people expecting the state to look after them, rather than state support being a last-resort safety net. This debilitating dependency mentality trickles down the generations, with children failing to learn the benefits of being financially self-sufficient from their parents. Social housing, although very necessary, all too often becomes a trap discouraging social mobility. Incapacity benefit gives a financial reward to people for thinking of themselves, and persuading others, that they are unwell, rather than encouraging them to do their best.

There can be few things more indicative of a retreat from the Protestant work ethic than the state paying people not to work because they are addicted to drugs or alcohol. However, the number of people on incapacity benefit as a result of such addictions has doubled from 48,700 in 1997 to over 101,300 in 2007. The British government now pays more people not to work because they are chemically addicted than it employs in the army. This is a new phenomenon, and hardly a sign of a healthy society.

The state has increasingly taken responsibility away from people in its well-meaning attempt to protect them from financial hardship or risks to health and safety. But, as Keith Joseph said, if you take responsibility away from people, they become irresponsible. The 'naked streets' movement returns to drivers the responsibility of assessing their own risks by removing street markings and furniture, leading to a sharp reduction in accidents. When drivers hand over responsibility for safety to crash barriers and zebra crossings, they become reckless.

Technology too has done its part in promoting individualism, eroding conversation and shared experiences. We no longer have to make music together in social gatherings because we have electronically canned it. We don't have to interact with others when we play because we can play with computers. We no longer have to watch the same film in the cinema as our whole community because we all have televisions at home; we no longer have to watch with our family because we all have TVs in our bedrooms; we no longer watch the same programmes as others because of multi-channel TV. We no longer even have to listen to the chatter of those around us on public transport, as we have an iPod plugged into our ears. The rise of text messages and emails has eroded the most fundamental communication of all, talking face to face. We order online from our solitude at home and no longer have to talk to a cashier in the shops. We don't get our money from human tellers who we get to know from our weekly visit in the bank, but from machines in the wall.

What can be done?

Policy-makers are left wondering what can be done about all this. The first challenge is to be really clear about what changes have been for the good and what for the bad. The legalisation of homosexuality was a definite improvement, as was the decline on the taboo in pre-marital sex. There are many other things we wouldn't want to change because the benefits they bring are so large. We don't want to uninvent female emancipation, even if the earlier lack of freedom of women meant fewer families broke up. We can't uninvent television.

Even where there is widespread agreement that we should tackle some aspect of decline, government has been notably ineffective in making much difference. In Britain in 2008, we have tried a decade of passing ever more draconian laws to curb behaviour such as binge drinking, but it has just got worse. It is clear that where there has been moral decline it is usually pretty unresponsive to legislation.

Behaviour change can be powerfully affected by a change in culture, but a change in culture is notoriously difficult to achieve. For half a century we've had a value system that declared that the state knew best, and had the right to intervene in the most private part of people's lives. That, hopefully, is now on the wane.

There are many things we can do, not least start talking about it. Politicians can use their pulpit to bring to national attention some of the issues that we face as a nation. We can shift legislation, to put more emphasis on responsibilities rather than rights (such as the responsibility to do community work if you want to receive unemployment benefit). But there is no magic bullet. We should be concerned, but not despair. We have an open society that talks about and confronts its problems in a generally honest manner, which is the first step to making things better.

There have been improvements but also unprecedented, unsettling declines in values in our own lifespan. Each age has been concerned about moral decline. Ours is no exception – although a lot of what is happening to society now is exceptional.