The Social Distance Between Us

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. In Poverty Safari, his award winning book, writer and rapper, Darren McGarvey, paints an honest picture of Britain's class divide. In his forthcoming book, he takes his argument further, claiming the pandemic has laid bare the contours of class inequality. But this crisis has also shown us that if the will is there, political and economic mechanisms do exist to solve poverty and inequality.

Ross Darren McGarvey, welcome to Renegade Inc. Really good to have you.

Darren McGarvey Thank you. Good to be with you.

Ross Darren, your book, Poverty Safari, tagline, Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass, published in 2017, won the Orwell Prize in 2018. Viewers must be watching this thinking, Why are you revisiting this? And my thrust on it is that actually this pandemic has uncovered all the pressure points that you have brilliantly outlined in the book. As the pandemic swept through, it has ripped the tide out and we're seeing now who's swimming naked. Just talk to us about the book in light of the pandemic.

Darren McGarvey Obviously, as a writer and someone who has experienced poverty and still remains very close to those who do, the pandemic is not precisely the sort of indication that you're looking for, but obviously every cloud does have a silver lining. And if that is one, then I think it is that the contours of class inequality and British society have been outlined so vividly that to deny their existence is to mark yourself out as a profoundly unserious person.

Ross When you look now at the shape of our social contract - you obviously grew up in poverty, very tough upbringing, and we're sitting here in 2021 - what do you reflect on and how do you see it?

Darren McGarvey I think we have seen what is possible in terms of state intervention. We have to remember that the pandemic came within the context of 10 years of austerity - an ideological response to a financial crisis caused primarily by financial deregulation and the greed or over-optimism of very wealthy, privileged people, often in collusion with politics. And so when we began to see that the amount of what the politicians would call generosity in terms of followers and self employment grants, and thus that in the next thing, this comes 10 years after being told there's no magic money tree. This comes after 10 years of being told that local authorities have to have the budgets cut by 25, 30 percent, which has real impacts, long lasting impacts, on the ground. So I think in that sense, if the public hasn't twigged on yet, that when the interests of over-mortgaged, privileged households are threatened, then the magic money tree is infinite. You know, because I certainly received a lot of non-means tested financial support during the pandemic. I wasn't having to jump through hoops. I didn't have to wait six weeks. I didn't have to take phone calls from people asking me how did I spend my money? And so you see not just the level of support that's become available, how quickly it was administered, how effectively it's been administered. But you see that kind of partnership between the state and and the private sector, when it's sensibly undertaken, can deliver results on problems really fast. History shows us that we only get social change when the people in power feel that they have no other option. And sometimes they will make

concessions when they feel that their instincts or power is threatened. And I think that the pandemic really did bring that into sharp focus, not just in terms of the economic response to the crisis, but also some of the other social activism that we've seen throughout the pandemic, particularly in relation to Black Lives Matter and George Floyd. So it's a kind of tricky paradox where when society is relatively stable, then there's less chance of radical reform. But when society becomes unstable, new options become available.

Ross For an economy that's the sixth largest in the world. And the tagline for the book, you use the word underclass. It's a word that I find very difficult because in a sense, it's almost invoking the caste system - the untouchables, if you like. Just unpack that word, underclass. And what was the structural economic reason that the so-called underclass are trapped in that economic malaise?

Darren McGarvey Yes, I think underclass was appropriate in this context because we tend to see society stratified as a working class, a middle class and an upper class. But below the working class, there are people who have been socially excluded since their early education, people who are suffering from the psychosocial impacts of trauma, of living in communities where violence is not just a physical threat, but it's the language that's constantly being communicated and interpreted. And so there are many people who have no advocates in this society. There are many people who have no access to support. And when they do have access to support, they're often chaperoned by very well-meaning professionals who have a theoretical understanding of what those people are suffering from. We only have to look at our criminal justice system, particularly for young people in Britain. A young person who comes into contact with the police, their chances of ending up in a young offender's institution multiplies automatically. Young offenders' institutions are highly populated by care experienced young people. But we still have a very kind of ancient understanding of crime and punishment. If you look at how Roman societies treated crime and punishment, while our society is not as violent, we haven't moved on a great deal from that level of sophistication about understanding what punitive measures actually achieve when you're trying to bring about behavioural change and young people. You have to deal with the social conditions that necessitate the behaviour. And I think that that lesson can be applied all across British society. We have the trappings of a modern society. We have the rhetoric of a liberal society. But in terms of our attitudes to property, to crime and punishment, patriarchal structures, we still have a lot in common with the ancient world, which seems like a crazy loony lefty thing to say. But when you really deep dive into it, then from property to landownership, not a great deal has changed in terms of our conceptions of what these things mean.

Ross And we'll come to that certainly - definitely the land ownership and property side of things. I just want to talk, though, about one of the themes that comes through in the book, and it's the theme of isolation. And it's actually in the title, Poverty Safari. It's as if that happens over there. It doesn't happen over here. I'm alright, Jack. Oh, isn't that awful? But you, having lived it, really felt that acute isolation. And when we go back to you talking about well-meaning professional people trying to get people in the underclass back on their feet and all the rest of it, there's still that isolation. They do understand theoretically, but they don't understand practically. How much does that isolation push addiction and all the negative social habits and socio economic figures? How much does the isolation of being the underclass, being the outsider, push negative social habits?

Darren McGarvey These are inextricably linked. I mean, we have been using substances or certain behaviours and activities to experience pleasant feelings of ease and comfort since the dawn of man. But where we see high concentrations of these kind of self-insistent, almost futile, compulsions and behaviours, particularly around alcohol, gambling, sex, pornography and illicit drug use, then what we see is a person who has initiated a coping strategy to deal with some kind of torment that they're experiencing. Sometimes that is isolation. Sometimes isolation exacerbates what it is. But then this becomes a kind of self-sustaining problem. And then what happens in poorer communities that are economically underdeveloped, which are subject to the very harsh market forces that benefit other people in society, is that the free market just says, 'supply and demand'. These people are looking for stress management solutions. So let's build a bookie's, let's build a pub, let's build an off-sales masquerading as a grocery. And every time money goes through the register, then that registers as a success in this kind of society where the only thing you're measuring is GDP to gauge the health and success of your culture and of your economy. So there are real deep seated problems, but we're not yet even at a point where a lot of the people who are put in charge of managing these things within communities can even understand it that big picture way. I find that, like the pandemic, we're going to have to come to a cliff edge before we are going to become willing to admit that there are aspects of a free market system which are beneficial, but that you cannot run communities and organise human life like a cash and carry because it just leads to death and despair and dysfunction.

Ross Isn't it the case that the economy simply doesn't want you as an individual, a hyper atomised individual? It doesn't want you as an individual to be happy. It certainly doesn't want you to be content because the unhappy and the discontent consume?

Darren McGarvey Yes, it's interesting because as someone who's been on a journey of trying to address negative coping strategies that I have adopted, then I have found solutions in the economy. I've found health programmes and educated myself about the physiology of addiction and the access to information is unparalleled. So I'm not trying to ascribe our country or economy with one intent or one character. It isn't complex but I think the harmful aspects of it are. On one hand, the free market system was about individuals acting rationally within a marketplace and that this was how society would organise itself. In reality, the companies often who are selling us the products work very hard to undermine our rationality by appealing to our primitive impulses, appealing to our fears, appealing to our insecurities. They sell junk food. That is an emotional experience. And if you're not equipped through education to deal with this, then you're not acting rationally within an economy, you're acting irrationally as a product of powerful, seductive advertising. And I'm not saying I want a communist society, but when people talk about this kind of economy like it's highly advanced and it's highly optimised for human health and benefit, then I just have to refer them to the spike in the suicide rate, the spike in obesity, the spike in mental health crises, the spike in the pornification of human relationships and the sexualisation of children. These are all toxic by-products of a system that determines success and failure along what cash is going through the register. And there's only so long before that becomes unsustainable.

Ross Darren McGarvey, welcome back to Renegade Inc. In that first half you talked about the social and economic problems that the UK faces. If I said to you that the UK has become a country that isn't big enough really now to play on the world stage of its own volition, but

it's too big to really look after its own citizens, would you say that that's a fair depiction of the British Isles?

Darren McGarvey I feel that when the political class is trying to resurrect the kind of dead language of empire and the iconography of empire to sell its own people a false idea of what Britain's role in the modern world is, then that's a sign of political weakness, that's a sign of political insecurity. I'm all for understanding the complexity of our national history. In some ways we led the world. In some ways we were inhumane in our behaviour. I realise that there is complexity there. But similarly, I also feel that we would find ourselves in a far better place, culturally, if we were able to contend with some of that complexity. No empire can stay expanded for its duration. It's just part of life to rise and fall, to expand and decline. And I think that the sooner that we have leaders who are able to articulate that honestly, then our national ego will become a more appropriate size.

Ross That sort of humility is needed now amongst the political class, isn't it? Because what you're actually describing is the interregnum. The old is dying, the new isn't yet born. And we've got this almost social constipation where something needs to pop out. And that's exactly where monsters - quoting Gramsci, the Italian social theorist - can be born. That's where you see the rise of populism. That's where you see the rise of fascism. If you were to go and sell to somebody, a Tsar, they're often called, sell the problems that we have to solve. And you said in the first half, these people, theoretically they're good, but they haven't been really able to interact with them. What would you depict as the top three problems from a social point of view that we need to address immediately and how to go about them, which isn't Whitehall driven, it's grassroots driven?

Darren McGarvey Yes, we need to have electoral reform in this country. It's undemocratic. And I'm not even just talking about the Scotland dimension of this. It's undemocratic that a majority government where a majority of the country have actually voted differently, can be in power, because what that means is that you have a government that can push through all sorts of policies that most people in the country might not benefit from or want. But under our first past the post system, then that is entirely normal. And I think that we see now that there's a great deal of democratic strain and contradiction at the heart of Britain's democracy. And that would bring us to the second problem - and I think the pressure for that has to come from grassroots. What we see in Britain in terms of the quality of our conversations and media around things like poverty, in terms of the kind of rise of what I would say are sort of right wing shock jocks that really exist as click bait and offer very little in the form of detailed discussion. And they create the illusion that people are participating in a conversation. These are the products of institutions and which are outdated - institutions of media, institutions of public politics, institutions of finance, of education, of criminal justice. As I said in the first half of the show, we are still very entangled in Victorian, or even predating, Victorian time conceptions of really fundamental concepts which a society organises itself around. And what we see is we have institutions that preserve the interests of a minority of people and then they make grudging concessions to everyone else along the way so that that isn't disrupted. So we need far reaching institutional reform as well. But that's not going to happen easily. People have to get organised in order for that to occur. And I think the third thing is, we heard a lot about following the science through the pandemic and politicians talking about following the science. And it was really great to see politicians adhering to policy driven along an empirical understanding of reality. What strikes me as odd

is that there is no other area in how Britain functions where this same principle is applied. It's not applied to the impact on brain development of children in poverty. It's not applied to the multiple care roles that women have to perform in the community, and it's not acknowledged whether or not financial system or benefits system. But there is no science applied to how communities are designed, how buildings are designed. We have all this understanding of how human beings can function optimally and yet we will sit by and do nothing in the face of educational inequality, social, economic, racial, sexual inequality, when there's a lot of science that exists already that we could be following. And so I would like to see society generally run along more scientific lines. We've lost touch with that. We can pioneer things. We can create things. I think what we want to do now is we place too much value on an outdated concept of what Britain is. Every country is guilty of this but I think the effects of that in Britain are beginning to get pretty severe.

Ross Managing decline is a sort of theme here, isn't it? And it's this idea that a good idea goes into a pub a good idea, and it comes out smashed to pieces. And really we come back to what you call the shock jocks in the corporate media. A lot of these people are really barriers to progress because they way-lay really good ideas. You don't have to put the radio on or the television on for too long to see how commentators constantly pull down really valuable ideas or when someone's trying to talk and explain how the economy actually works, whatever it might be, for them to have to stop, put down the idea, deal with this constant hectoring and badgering and then they can go on. Nothing gets created in that environment, does it?

Darren McGarvey No, no. I think it's a product partly of deregulation of media, which has had a disastrous impact in the United States. You know, I think of people like Tucker Carlson and even people like Rachel Maddow. These are people who are apparently on two different sides of the spectrum. But I can't stand them equally and for the exact same reasons. I think in Britain we have a more robust journalistic culture which has becoming restrained partly because of the pressure of market forces. Newspapers, broadcasters, are having to cut their staff, they're having to bring in more advertising. And so I think it leads to a kind of degradation in the quality of conversation where rather than getting the right balance of public phone-ins and shock jocks, which we need to have a discussion radio, talk radio, that's fine. But this idea that people who actually have gone to university for ten years and understand something really deeply, can be easily dismissed because wee Jimmy from Dundee has phoned in and his pal says that the virus isn't real and they both get an equal footing because market forces dictate it. So, this to me is absolute nonsense.

Ross I laugh because of the absurdity, the absolute absurdity. In the first half, you talked very briefly about landownership. One of the things that we say regularly on this programme, is if you want to see the mechanism for inequality, the housing market is there for you. All the unearned increment, as it's called in economics, accrues. You sell the house, you then pocket that and the poor poor stay poor poor. It's one of the reasons the Duke of Westminster, the new one, is the richest guy in the country and it's why the underclass exist. When that mechanism is at full tilt, which it has been since Thatcher came to power until now, structural inequality is going to rise. You talked briefly about landownership. What do you think you would do with the mother, as Winston Churchill called it, the mother of all monopolies? How would you start to socialised some of that unearned increment so actually you can capture community value and start bringing the underclass to the table?

Darren McGarvey First of all, we have to acknowledge that land always has to be owned. The question is, who owns it and what is the model of ownership? So even if the state owns the land, that's the owner and therefore they are responsible for developing that land sustainably and what have you. The problem that we have in Britain, which is where you'll find some of the most antiquated, ancient models of land ownership. We have a system of land ownership where many of the wealthiest people remain largely anonymous. And actually holding them to account is very difficult because of the opaque nature of all of the legal personalities that landowners can hide behind. And actually, it's in the issue of land ownership that we find many of the tropes associated with inequality, generally. So the landowners are not accountable. They receive massive subsidies for developing the land in accordance with the public good. But even if their land then gains value as a result of that public subsidy when they sell the land on, then they get all the profit. And I would like to see governments' just move in on it, you know, because every landowner has a price. And some of this land is not as expensive as you would think it is. I mean, 6 acres in Scotland just went to a community buy-out for 4 million pounds. This is change at the back of a government couch. The state possesses the resources to purchase a lot of the land and also to set that land up for whatever the purpose is going to generate the best windfall from it. I just don't understand why there's this hands off approach. Well, of course I do. It's because landowners have tremendous political power. They have tremendous political influence. And this is why the system of land ownership in Britain and in Scotland hasn't changed much in a few hundred years.

Ross Can you put some of the social ills that you depict in Poverty Safari - addiction, violence, the fact that children are growing up having to witness so much dysfunctional family environment - can you put the landownership case to the fact that unless that monopoly is liquidated, you're going to keep accruing these social ills?

Darren McGarvey Absolutely, because it's in this system of landownership that you, as I say, that you find all of the necessary ingredients for a deeply unequal society. When someone owns a piece of land, whether it's a property developer, whether it's some other private enterprise, consortium or one individual, then they set the price for everybody who works and plays and lives there. And, actually, you just have to try and drive through that country in a car and look all around you, and at first you might think I'm out in my country. But then try and get out of your car and walk onto one of these fields or walk onto one of these hills, you'll find, actually, just the same as walking along the side of your own river in your own city, you're not allowed to go into a lot of these places. Now, while people will not necessarily associate that with inequality, what it means is that the economic future of everyone depends on the whims of the people who own the land and the property. So Buccleuch, he owned all the land around Langham, which is a town in the borders, right? So it was completely landlord locked. Its entire economic future is tied up and being able to attract environmental tourism, being able to develop the land sustainably, but also being able to attract young people back to the town who are fleeing for economic opportunities in the central belt as a result of the economic decline and an ageing population. So why should one man who wants to set the price at ten million pounds be the person dictating whether that community is allowed to move into the 21st century? In essence, that is what the problem with land inequality is. And land inequality speaks to, and necessitates, every other form of inequality.

Ross Poverty Safari was out in 2017 as I said. It won the Orwell Prize in 2018. Your next book, The Social Distance Between US, which, by the way, is a fantastic title, albeit only a working title. Just pitch it to us briefly, if you could.

Darren McGarvey The book is about using the social distancing as a kind of jump-off point to talk about proximity between social classes and experiences and interests and the conflicts and problems that arise from that. It's a book that argues that class inequality is real and that this normal that we all want to get back to was no normal at all. And I see that as someone who would love to get back to normal. But if we really analyse what things were like in this country before the pandemic then we'll find that if we go back to that, is just committing social suicide.