

# Why is there no ‘right to food’, or to grow food in Britain?

Covid has exposed Britain’s endemic poverty, and the chaotic state of poverty-relief systems; *is a solution being deliberately ignored?*

Paul Mobbs, *The ‘Meta-Blog’*, issue no.13, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021



**Britain’s establishment has a historical hang-up about feeding the poor; a four-hundred year-old need to address not ‘need’, but whether that need is ‘deserving’ or not. It’s such an engrained issue it’s enshrined in our national character: From Britain’s classical literature we get the face of poor ‘parish boy’ *Oliver Twist*, staring up at Mr Bumble and saying, “Please, sir, I want some more”; today it’s Marcus Rashford, addressing the Prime Minister via the news media to ask the almost identical question.**

It’s a damn simple point to ask, but one which the establishment are seemingly unable to address: *In one of the richest countries in the world, why are people going hungry.*

More than that, why is Britain one of the exemplars of the contemporary phenomena of ‘[double-burden malnutrition](#)’ – where the diet of those who are ‘sufficiently fed’ (in terms of calories) is not of a high enough quality to maintain their general health.

One possible explanation is the successive failure of the British state – of whatever political persuasion – to recognise food, and a sufficient quality of food, as a human right; and to devise policies across all areas of government which support that right, and to ensure it is enacted everywhere.

*Is the answer staring us in the face?*  
(from the David Lean film, ‘*Oliver Twist*’, 1948)



## The right to food

Britain’s politicians like to think they’re really good at protecting their citizen’s rights – despite [the evidence](#) to the contrary. What many of those who complain about the abuse of human rights here ignore, however, is the often overlooked [Article 25](#) of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#):

(1) *Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.*

(2) *Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.*

“Hang on!”, you might say. “Don’t we give ‘social benefits’ to to guarantee that right already?”

Technically, yes we do. In which case, you also have to ask why the [use of food banks](#) in Britain has increased consistently for the last decade.

‘Food’ is the neglected human right within Britain’s various system of social provision. Excellent groups like the [Trussell Trust](#), or [Fareshare](#), try to plug that gap; but in the absence of co-ordinated policies from the top, they are battling a growing problem with finite and uncertain resources.

Britain has signed and ratified the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#). One of [the agreements](#) under that treaty is an obligation to enact a ‘[right to food](#)’:

*The availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture.*

The problem isn't simply the provision or level of benefits; the problems are structural. Today's suffering is created by the continuation of policies which were first enacted over four hundred years ago.

In a society which primarily serves the needs of [affluent consumers](#), and whose politics are based around ['aspirational' values](#), planning for those who cannot meet the minimum requirements for that life-style tends to be an afterthought. The block to progress is not so much about tackling poverty, but the complex issues of structural poverty and ill-health in an affluent society – *which contemporary politics demonstrably cannot deal with.*

### The food 'precariat'

This failure reflects the inability of British politics to address the changing economic basis for social class. No longer are there simply the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, that governments traditionally crafted policies to deal with. Many of those accessing food banks, and social benefits, [are in work](#) – but that work doesn't pay enough to live on.

As a result of changes to the nature and security of employment, there is a whole [new social class](#) which contemporary politics does not recognise: [The Precariat](#). What studies find is that ['post-industrial'](#) patterns of employment and work have evolved a [new class](#) of the ['multiply deprived'](#), who make-up around 15% of the population.

That 15% also correlates to the research on food insecurity. According to the Government's own watchdog, the Food Standard Agency, as part of their regular research into food and diet, [in 2019](#):

- ◆ 17% of households had worried about running out of food in the previous year;
- ◆ 12% had experienced running out of food, and did not have money to buy more; and
- ◆ 11% could not afford to eat balanced meals.

Having 'sufficient' food is more than just having the money to buy food. The systems of retailing, and how it is accessed, have a big influence on how people consume food:

In many of the poorest communities there are few shops selling good, affordable food – and national retail policy, and business regulation, have for the last four decades made that worse by concentrating economic power amongst a few large retailers, relocated to out-of-town car-accessible locations;

With the rising costs of car ownership, many in the poorest communities [lack the ability](#) to access these larger shops as they do not have [adequate transport](#) – and local transport policies, focussed primarily on car-based transport, have exacerbated the ability to access these new ['private' commercial centres](#) using public transport options;

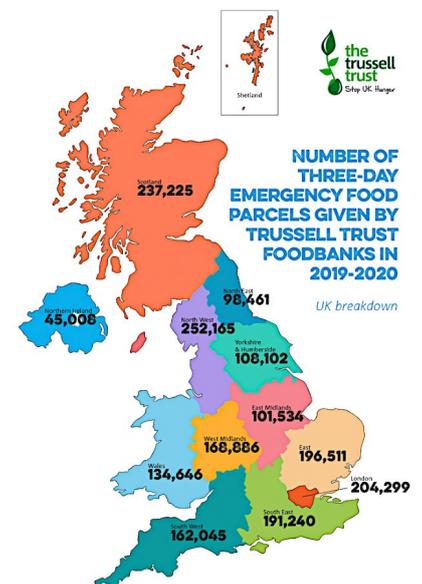
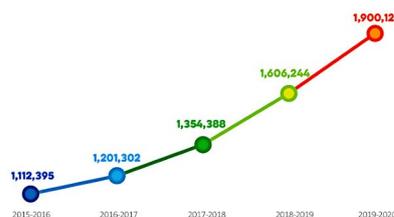
What is even more critical though, the national requirements for rented housing provision have neglected the provision of kitchens, food preparation, and storage spaces – meaning that even if they had basic food ingredients, many might have a challenging trying time cook them.

That last point is significant when it comes to the provisions made via food banks. Some people do not have the ability to cook food, and so food banks have to supply [ready-to-eat meals](#) that can be heated in a microwave. Alternately people may have kitchens, but they do not have the money to buy the gas or electricity required to cook it – in part because the poorest customers on ['pay-as-you-go' meters](#) suffer a cost penalty from utility companies.

What these communities [often have instead](#) are rows of cheap take-away food shops, selling low quality, nutritionally deficient food – the exact opposite of the requirements set out in *'the right to food'*.

Between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020, the Trussell Trust's food bank network distributed 1.9 million three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis, a 18% increase on the previous year. More than seven hundred thousand of these went to children.

**IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS, FOOD BANK USE IN OUR NETWORK HAS INCREASED BY 74%**



## A conscious political decision, over history

Politicians have not ‘consciously’ – as in, a deliberately stated and itemised policy – sought to make the lives of this 15% of the population miserable.

What politicians of all parties have sought to do is prioritise the needs of the affluent, over those who are not affluent, as a matter of general policy – and therein, through the persistent bureaucratic bias this created, the lives of the non-affluent have gradually worsened for the last 40 years.

To quote the recent report to the UN Commission on Human Rights by Professor Philip Alston:

*“The experience of the United Kingdom, especially since 2010, underscores the conclusion that poverty is a political choice. Austerity could easily have spared the poor, if the political will had existed to do so. Resources were available to the Treasury at the last budget that could have transformed the situation of millions of people living in poverty, but the political choice was made to fund tax cuts for the wealthy instead.”*

As a general point I disagree with the professor on that: I can find no difference between the policies being enacted today, and the policies that the ruling elite of Britain have enacted since the Norman Conquest.

Today policies on welfare, and especially on the provision of free food for the poor, are a continuation of policies that seek to persecute the poor that generations have had to endure.

*Why?* Because – from the government’s response to Marcus Rashford’s school meals campaign, to the continued restrictions on benefits, to the perpetual persecution of those with permanent disability or chronic illness with ‘fitness to work’ tests – they enact the same indifference towards the needs of the poor, and of those in poverty, that has been practised in Britain for centuries.

That’s why I’m writing this; as it appears that no one is willing to openly discuss this age-old ‘class’ issue; perhaps because it highlights the excess of the affluent middle classes. It creates, for want of a better term, ‘guilt’ over the relative well-being of the

erudite elite of the media and politics – and if there’s one thing to kill a discussion on political affairs, it’s the realisation that most people do possess a social conscience when you poke at it.

What the aspirational middle classes fail to understand is that, be it climate change or resource depletion, their entire world is on the precipice of collapse. Everything they now take for granted – as Covid has recently exposed – is actually impermanent, and subject to dismantlement at any moment.

Though they may be indifferent of the plight of the poor today, tomorrow that could be them. As with the Covid crisis, those who fared the best were the most wealthy. This should teach the ‘*affluent but not wealthy*’ sixty-odd percent ‘middle’ of the population an important lesson:

*They had better change their outlook before ecological collapse takes their cherished lifestyle away.*



Food, not wealth, is the root of a ‘good life’

For the last 18 months or so the focus of my work has turned away from energy and resources to look more directly at food – or rather, *the food system* – building upon some work I did a few years ago.

My home town, where generations of my family have lived, is one of those multiply-deprived

hot-spots that are the typical home of ‘the precariat’: It has a younger and more ethnically diverse population; with higher levels of shift and temporary work than the surrounding regions – all of which trend towards lower wealth.

In one of the furthest corners of the affluent South East commuter belt, with punishing housing costs as a result, up to two-fifths of the town lies within the 10% to 20% most deprived areas in England. Alongside that designation we have the inevitable food poverty, the multiple local food banks, and the poor health resulting from generational poverty, that characterises such areas.

Technically I grew up in poverty. I never saw it like that, though. To me it was all ‘fun’, and it set me up to live the ‘low impact lifestyle’ I have lived since:

My first home in the core of 'Old Banbury' was demolished as part of the slum clearance programmes of the 1970s (it's now a car park). As a child we always had enough 'good' food, though, as we grew it on our allotment (now an industrial estate) and at home. My preference for ['low-tech' cooking](#) today is a legacy of that tutelage.

I grew up foraging from hedgerows with parents and grandparents to harvest [wild food](#), often to [keep for the Winter](#). That past-time, likewise, is currently in doubt with the [criminalisation of trespass](#).

As a child we would take a caravan on holiday, stopping in lay-bys on our way to and from a friend's land in Wales; another activity which is about to be criminalised. Replicated tomorrow, it would appear my idyllic youth (*photo, below*) could render my children to prison for following the same simple, low-cost, self-sufficient lifestyle.

### A solution: *Food sovereignty*

Just as [land inclosure](#) two centuries ago removed the people from the rural to new urban areas, since the 1950s the adoption of consumerism has completed that process – removing people from any general means for of ['food sovereignty'](#).

For example, our local council has possibly bankrupted itself [bailing-out a shopping centre](#) development; but it has no power to help its people address their need for food directly by giving access to land. Worse; if the failure of our local shopping centre does bring down the council, it will be under pressure to sell what little public assets it has left, especially land, for private development.

**From climate change to the collapse of traditional employment, we face multiple economic and social challenges. What we lack is any rationale for allowing people to create their own, sustainable route beyond those restrictions focussing on food sovereignty – to address the foundation of all human well-being, *the accessibility of good food*. This was the mechanism sought over a century ago to alleviate the worst problems of Victorian industrial urbanism; a vision abandoned with the rise of the economic cult of affluence and consumption in the 1970s & 80s. Arguably the government of Britain, at all levels, have a duty to enact this as a 'right' for all to pursue today – so that people can once more find security, locally, through direct involvement in food production, and sustaining their diet, and ideally their lives directly from the land.**

The British state has historically rendered it's people dependent upon 'middle men' – from farmers, to retailers, to agribusiness corporations, to the capital markets that underpin modern technological farming – to access the produce of the land; and those systems are in imminent danger of collapse.

Against the backdrop of [ecological breakdown](#), where we know the global food logistics chain and [intensive agriculture](#) are doomed by [resource depletion](#) and [climate change](#), to restrict access to land, and make people ever-more dependent upon complex supply chains, is suicidal. Unless we can close resource loops by bringing people closer to the source of their food, the future disruption to [global food supply](#) poses real risks of a breakdown of civility in the 'most developed' nations.

The only thing I can think that is even worse is the aristocratic ['rewilding' agenda](#): Lobbied for by landed 'environmentalists' as a solution to ecological breakdown, it seeks to corral people into urban centres eating industrially grown food – [denying access](#) to the land for ordinary people as anything other than a [paying tourist](#).

The reality is that if the Earth is to have any future then we need to ['rewild the people'](#) within nature; not separate them from it. That [means overcoming](#) a millennia of [self-serving 'political' leadership](#) in Britain that has systematically severed ordinary people from the land.

The simplest way to start doing that is to create local opportunities for people to start growing their own food; and affordably living [low impact](#), self-supporting lifestyles upon the land.



*'The Idylls of our Youth'*  
(our back garden, mid-1970s, with fruit & vegetable patches, a large greenhouse, and a chicken run)