

Giro¹ blues

Britain is divided into two fiefdoms, regional and political. Les Smith reports from the alienated North.

So, the South remains Tory. The little villages of Kent and Dorset snuggle down into their complacent duvets, too smug² even to fiddle³ as joy-riders⁴ in the North burn stolen Japanese cars.

5 Let me offer you a few fragments of the North of England. I do not claim to tell the truth, the whole truth ... I offer no sociology, simply observation. I live in Bolton. I live here, with my eyes open and my ears alert. (...)

A young man of 22, jobless, received a letter from the dole⁵ office warning of dire consequences if he should turn up late once more for the futile and humiliating ritual of signing on. He is late, of course. Late, as usual. Late, as always. (...) he rushes from the house in a desperate hurry to catch the bus that might just get him there on time.

10 There is a dual carriageway⁶ to be crossed. The bus stop is on the other side. He hurtles forward to reach it. The car that killed him was driven by a man who will be haunted by that tragedy all his life.

(...) Now his parents live in the shadow of melancholy and anger. For them, their son, bright and eager for life, was a victim of Thatcherism. Are they unreasonable to think so? (...) Do you say "rubbish" in St John's Wood, as you slip the BMW into third gear?

A chip shop on the Top O'th Brow estate in Bolton. Here the unemployment is phenomenal, the alsatians⁷ are half crazy and the kids are playing on the streets in the drizzle at 10 at night. The lunch-time queue stretches outside the chip shop.

20 One by one fat mothers, 24 years old going on 45, two toddlers⁸ draped around them, a third baby squatting in the buggy, get to the counter and order — chips with gravy⁹, chips with scraps (bits of fried batter¹⁰ that have fallen from the fish) and chips with pea soup (the water that the dried peas have been soaked and cooked in). Chips (...) with anything that's free or cheap. Few can afford fish. Not even on Giro day.

25 My ears are itching¹¹ as I listen to conversations of who's in jail now, who's living with whom, who's getting one over on¹² the Department of Social Security. The rules of civil society simply do not apply here. Montesquieu has no insight to offer, and the Labour Party, though supported overwhelmingly by that declining number who bother to vote, is spoken of almost as cynically as any bunch of politicians, who are, after all, "only in it for themselves".

30 Just like the gangs of 13-year-olds wagging school¹³ in order to nick¹⁴ rented videos from their neighbours.

This is a partial view from the North, I admit. But it remains a truthful one. Truthful for a section of our society that has increased in number several-fold during the years of Tory

¹ a) The equivalent of the old French *Chèques Postaux* (now: *Banque Postale*). b) Unemployed people got a cheque from the local social security office which they could then cash at a post office. This cheque was often referred to as a "giro".

² Very pleased in an annoying way.

³ To move about; to do several things but complete nothing; to do unnecessary things.

⁴ People who steal a car to drive it for enjoyment.

⁵ "To be on the dole" is to be unemployed and thus receive unemployment benefit. Hence "dole money", "dole office"...

⁶ A road with an area of land in the middle, dividing the lanes of traffic which are moving in opposite directions.

⁷ Alsatian dogs.

⁸ Very young children.

⁹ A sauce served with meat and vegetables.

¹⁰ A mixture of flour, eggs and milk, used to cover food before frying it.

¹¹ Causing a slight, uncomfortable soreness which makes one want to scratch the skin.

¹² Deceiving, conning, tricking the Department of Social Security.

¹³ Playing truant.

¹⁴ To steal.

Session 2

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SUJET DE CIVILISATION BRITANNIQUE (M. DARRIBHAUDE)

The following document, adapted from: *The Guardian* (October 9th 1991) presents typical features of the North/South divide.
Draw up a list of these features and comment on them.

35 supremacy. There is now an under-class several million strong living lives of desperation, some quiet and others, as we have seen recently on Tyneside, not so quiet.

People need homes. They dream, of course, of winning the pools, a 10p yankee coming up on the horses, or even of getting a job with lots of overtime. But dreams are not the same as hope. It's interesting that people do not hope for themselves. They hope for their children. Their own lives seem hopeless, but does it have to be the same for Jason or Tracey?

40 The Tories have said yes to that. They have taken hope away from the children. They have dogged¹⁵ them, hounded¹⁶ them into corner after corner, stolen their right to work and to some kind of dignity and independence. In the north and the south they've done this. But it's here that the bite has been most deep and humiliating.

I have seen London soccer fans, safe in well-policed pens¹⁷, wave £10 notes at the home support. I have heard their chants of "We've All Got Jobs". I have seen the pictures of Metropolitan policemen flashing their weighty overtime-laden pay slips¹⁸ at miners' pickets¹⁹.

45 We have seen the North/South divide in action, believe me. Like all victims we have taken petty comfort from the discomfiture of the other side. Shortly after Thatcher's 1987 victory storms tore the roofs off houses in the south of England. There was a little malicious celebration in Lancashire pubs. After all these people had just inflicted on us another five years of a government blind to our needs and deaf to our pleas. Let them soak in the rain for a few days. Why not? (...)

50 What is the view from Tunbridge Wells? Do you see only the smart shops, the Porsche salesrooms and the estate agent's windows? Is that why you report a 20 per cent lead for the Tories and Labour nowhere?

55 Crane²⁰ your neck (...) 3,000 miles, to New York City. There you see chaos masquerading as society. There you see the future writ²¹ large. The drug wars have started already in Moss Side, Manchester, England. The knives are out. The guns are out. The next riot is waiting to happen. Does this make you happy?

60 Are you happy with the fat-jowled²² smugness of a Chancellor who described the human catastrophe of unemployment as "a price well worth paying"? It isn't, after all, his Porsche that will shrink as the price is paid in Bolton, Sheffield, Newcastle. We will pay the price, we, and our children, rushing over dual carriageways (...).

65 We will be voting Labour in the north. We seek from Labour a recognition that there is, after all, such a thing as society²³. We seek the right to hope again, that our children may not experience their lives as a penny pinching²⁴ struggle against the weariness of spirit caused by these 12 dole-dreary years.

¹⁵ To follow or track like a dog, esp. with hostile intent.

¹⁶ To pursue or harass without respite.

¹⁷ A small area surrounded by a fence.

¹⁸ A piece of paper to show how much money someone has earned.

¹⁹ *Piquets de grève*. This sentence refers to the 1984 miners' strike, when large numbers of policemen were on duty to control striking miners day and night for weeks on end.

²⁰ Stretch.

²¹ An old English form of "written".

²² A jaw, a cheek, or a fold of flesh hanging from the jaw, as of a very fat person.

²³ This is a reference to a famous statement by Mrs Thatcher, who claimed that society did not exist.

²⁴ Avoiding spending even the smallest amounts of money.