

Webinar Learning Report

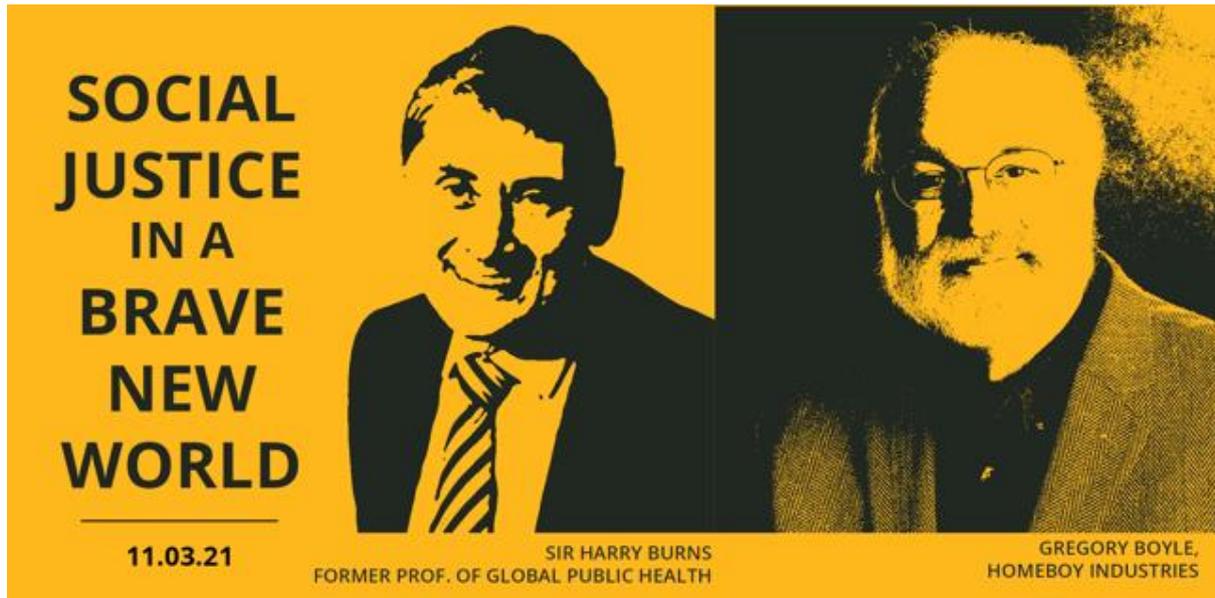
Social Justice in a Brave New World



Community Justice Scotland

Date: 11 March 2021

Speakers: Professor Sir Harry Burns, Father Gregory Boyle, Byron Vincent



Introduction

This event by Community Justice Scotland brought together two experts in social health and justice to discuss what's next for us as a society after the Covid 19 pandemic.

The discussion noted that whilst the Covid pandemic has affected all of us, it has not affected us all equally, and has exposed many of the weaknesses and existing inequalities and injustices in our societies.

They considered the questions:

- *How do we push past pandemic fatigue to rise to the challenges ahead?*
- *What practical steps do we need to take to improve social justice in Scotland?*
- *How do we use this moment of transition to work for a better justice system?*

At SCSN we are very keen to see action to improve social justice in Scotland because we know that social injustices directly impact both on health and on community safety issues, with negative consequences of social injustices including all kinds of crime, alcohol and drug problems, loneliness and isolation, unintentional harm, suicide and feelings of safety within communities.

Summary of Event

Opening the event, Byron Vincent said that there is an increasing understanding that negative behaviour probably comes from negative experiences.

Panellists agreed that Covid had shown that we are not all in the same boat – same storm but very different boats.

There was a discussion around how the pandemic has resulted in a decrease in hope, or an increase in feelings of hopelessness – with Father Boyle saying that this had resulted in an increase in gang violence in his locale in Los Angeles.

“Violence is the ultimate expression of hopelessness” –
Father Gregory Boyle

Understanding how trauma affects the concept of individual ‘choices’

A key part of the discussion relating to attitudes towards people who's behaviour has been criminal is understanding that trauma affects the developing brain in ways that mean that 'not all choices are created equal'. Father Boyle added that 'it's not about good folks or bad folks, but the unequal burdens we all have to carry.' He said right now 'we punish wound and isolate brokenness.' Panellist agreed that we cannot punish pain out of people.

Harry Burns said that we need to question prevailing 19th century philosophy (including economic philosophy) that emphasises choice, because we all vary in our ability to make good choices depending on our experiences in life.

On trauma, early interventions can prevent negative outcomes, but even when people are older, unhealthy or negative adaptations to the brain caused by trauma in early life can be changed if you change the circumstances in which a person is living.

Thinking about crime – panellists discussed how criminal behaviour like violence or hate are not crime problems but wellness problems with Father Boyle asking, 'Who hates? People who aren't whole or aren't healthy.'

Cost of trauma when not prevented or left untreated

Harry Burns said that every year, the USA spends \$127 billion dollars on the combined costs of adverse childhood experiences (criminal justice, addictions, poor health, lost output etc.) and that politicians need to be made to realise that by not supporting families governments are throwing away billions every year.

How do we change things for the better and promote social justice?

Panellists discussed the importance of breaking down barriers that exclude people from participating in society, with Harry Burns commenting that we need to do things *with people* and not *to people*.

Father Boyle gave some fantastic insights on how change for the better can be blocked when we create distance between groups of people with differing views or experiences and how this can contribute to 'othering'.

He warned against being self-righteous or self-congratulatory when dealing with bad behaviour – e.g. 'I stand against hate', because being either self-

"Moralism hasn't help make our society better. When we strike a high moral distance in our quest for social justice, it's distancing us from each other" – Father Gregory Boyle

congratulatory/self-righteous or angry creates distance between people.

Being trauma informed across society and understanding the implications of trauma as it relates to people's behaviour was a key point emphasised repeatedly. Speakers agreed that everything starts with making sure that children feel valued, cared for and loved – with Harry Burns saying that the best teachers he ever met are the ones who are willing to give children hugs if they need them, regardless of whether it's against the 'rules'.

'Kindness is the only non-delusional response to everything' – Father Gregory Boyle

In terms of specific advice on how to change things for the better, recommendations included:

- Keep talking about trauma and smart/social justice
- Tell politicians what you think!
- We need a universal basic income and to get real about tackling poverty, showing people that they are valued
- Communities should work together to find the best ways of supporting people and be supported to take action that they identify needs taken

You can watch the full event on the Community Justice Scotland Youtube channel [here](#).

For examples of further learning in this area, visit the Second Chancers [website](#).