

Rough sleeping in an election year



Editorial

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Sleeping rough in our cities has become commonplace and is on the increase. For those unfortunates spending the night in little more than cardboard boxes or makeshift tents, it's no joke to be on the cold streets at night and physically and mentally dangerous. Tragically, now included in this category, we must add over a million people displaced from their homes in Gaza. One might also add to this list those bombed out of everyday existence in Ukraine.

We have learned that 2024 is deemed a worldwide election year with 'democracy' being exercised for something like 2 billion people in various countries. Of course, this exercise will often be little more than to provide a veneer of respectability to autocratic leaders seeking to extend their terms of office. Downright manipulation or more closet gerrymandering will be a feature that is never far away.

Thus far the results are predicted to produce a seemingly inevitable rise of the populist right. The various manifestations of this may have little in common except one noisy drum banged in response to growing levels of migration. This is setting nation against nation, culture against culture and people against people.

A good example of this is evident buried away inside the British government's Criminal Justice Bill, now at the committee stage of becoming legislation. The proposed legislation includes measures that would make rough sleeping an offence with a £2500 fine or imprisonment. There is a profound irony here as rough sleepers are most unlikely to have any money at all and imprisonment would be a draconian way of putting a roof over their heads. The truth is that this kind of rhetoric will supposedly play well with at least some of the electorate.

Unsurprisingly, charitable organisations like Crisis have been quick to criticise. Rosie Perkins the campaigns' manager says that the legislation "amounts to the criminalisation of rough sleeping"ⁱ.

For those of us who seek an historical perspective for the present era, the sixteenth century harsh vagrancy laws enacted during the short reign of the boy king Edward VI, after the

English dissolution of the monasteries (the then effective providers of social services) prescribed branding on the chest. In the Wild West of the untrammelled internet it is easy to find individual posts recommending similar treatment for those with nowhere, like Jesus, to lay their heads.

It is simple to describe the problems and to fear for the future. Solutions are hard to come by but surely they should not be found in brutal short-term fixes for political expediency in an election year?

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ⁱ <https://www.cityam.com/we-already-know-how-to-end-rough-sleeping-so-why-havent-we/>