After the Floods



The recent floods in the Calder Valley, affecting Brighouse, Sowerby Bridge, Mytholmroyd and Hebden Bridge areas, have been devastating. Some 2500 homes were affected either by partial or total flooding and some 1700 businesses were flooded. The costs of this latest excess of rainfall amounts to something like £15 million with many homes uninsured or with losses – the material ones, at least – difficult to calculate. In addition to the human and personal consequences, roads and bridges have been affected to the tune of £35 million, money that will have to be found to repair Elland bridge and canal towpaths as well as other aspects of the Valley’s infrastructure.

Such a scenario has, of course, happened before. Devastation on a similar scale was caused in the floods two years ago and on previous occasions. What has caused these floods? The flippant answer would be ‘a lot of rain’, and of course this is somewhat true. The quantity of rain on Christmas Day and Boxing Day was well over 200% its usual figure. Climate change and the unpredictability of storms are contributory factors. But so also are a lack of preparation – sounding a siren when the waters lap at people’s doorsteps doesn’t seem to be the most insightful or diligent of measures. In the aftermath, groups of police officers standing around in Mytholmroyd, hot coffee in hand, protecting Sainsbury’s and doing little else, is evident of who gets priority treatment in this civil disaster zone. As for a visit of the Valley’s Conservative M.P., well, enough said.

Despite the fact that the community response was overwhelming, ranging from those shovelling up mud, to farmers using tractors to shift detritus, to local mosques lending a hand and the Sikh community doling out hundreds of chicken biryanis – no sign of those who wish to divide our communities like the so-called English Defence League or England First – a fair deal of the responsibility for the rapidity and volume of rain water descending into the valley comes from careless and negligent landowners on the tops. Heather burning, digging out channels and the removal of moss in order to get a good shot during the grouse shooting season have contributed massively to people’s suffering downstream. Those with hundreds of acres of land care little for those with small houses in the valley.

Once again, those with least have been the most prejudiced by this disaster. Touchy-feely meetings where we are urged not to get too political and to maintain decorum called by Calderdale Friends of the Earth and Hebden Bridge business associations are designed precisely to direct the flow of our collective anger elsewhere and to dampen it down so the real culprits are once again let off the hook. But action can and is being taken. Small dams on the tops have been constructed from low-tech resources; moss has been replaced, thus providing for greater absorption; demands have been made that insurance companies insure people; community action has done more than the authorities. The time has come to rescind the old model of ‘landowner consent’ to try to encourage those rich enough to earn vast tracts of land to change their ways. Far better than calling on politicians to act on our behalf are the measures that are being put in place for the next time (there will be one) so that the community can spring into action and help those most directly affected by the rising tide. In the meantime: the Valley needs funds; a proper emergency plan needs to be put in place; and the finger needs to be pointed at those responsible for upland run-off and valley flooding.

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