

# COMING UP FROM THE STREETS

THE STORY OF

**THE BIG  
ISSUE**



TESSA SWITHINBANK

**COMING UP FROM THE STREETS**

This book is dedicated to:  
Paddy and Diana  
Mr P and Kit

**COMING UP FROM THE STREETS**  
**THE STORY OF *THE BIG ISSUE***

*Tessa Swithinbank*

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# FOREWORD

*Anita Roddick*

LIKE THOUSANDS OF other people across the UK, I've got to know a fair number of *The Big Issue* vendors in the paper's ten-year existence. You strike up a conversation and before you know it you're sharing stories. It's the most primal form of human communication and, as far as I'm concerned, it's been one of *The Big Issue's* most meaningful achievements, because it's turned homelessness from a distant 'something' into an intimate group of 'someones'.

In doing that, *The Big Issue* has armed us with a sense of how a society can fail its citizens by denying them shelter, a fundamental human right. So, its story is a surprisingly comprehensive portrait of not-so-great Britain in the 1990s, a decade that saw-sawed through extremes of disillusionment and optimism to end up back where it began. Well, maybe not quite, but one lesson that was inescapably confirmed in the 1990s was that there is very little faith left in politics, politicians or their agents. When the time comes to exercise our democratic right and choose our leaders, it would seem that the most reliable choice open to us at the beginning of the new century is self-help.

That is, of course, another right that homelessness takes away – the freedom to choose. In trying to restore it, *The Big Issue* has evolved as textbook social entrepreneurialism. I recognize many of the triumphs and trials that make this story such a riveting and valuable one, from its activist origins to the latter-day challenges that success poses to the founder's ideals. Oh yes, a word about that founder – John Bird is the incarnation of my conviction that passion is the most persuasive force known to humankind. His passion is practically a force of nature. Stand in its way and you are crushed if you aren't carried along.

Fortunately, there are hundreds – maybe even thousands – of people who would say that John’s passion has carried them to places they never thought they’d see, with *The Big Issue* as their means of transport. He’s done it in the healthiest possible way – in a partnership with the people he wants to help. I’ve never been a believer in cheque-book charity; a hand-up is better than a hand-out. There’s ample proof of that in the success stories of *The Big Issue* vendors who’ve managed to get back on level ground, whose work has renewed their sense of dignity and security.

The idea of partnering is something I’ve been used to at The Body Shop. It is the foundation of our commitment to trading with economically marginalized communities around the world. But *The Big Issue*’s success awes me because homelessness isn’t only about economic deprivation. People of all ages and backgrounds end up on the streets because of domestic violence and sexual abuse, for example. To create successful partnerships with such a range of people in need has called for a rare kind of compassionate pragmatism, without forgetting that, at the same time, *The Big Issue* has been evolving as a quality paper that hundreds of thousands of people want to read every week.

I’m a sucker for a good story, and there are plenty in *Coming Up From The Streets*. In some, I identify with John Bird, the editor-in-chief, who maybe doesn’t do things the way everyone wishes he would. In others, I recognize the cynics waiting to leap at the first shortfall or perceived compromise. Or I can detect the perennial worry that commercial success will somehow damp the fire. As I mentioned earlier, the substance of these stories is familiar from my own experiences. There’s never been a road map for the social entrepreneur to follow, so it’s useful to find out exactly what other people must deal with. But, perhaps, this is the road map taking shape. When I’m asked about my hope for the future, I usually answer that I would like to see the spirit of enterprise make a seamless shift from servant of private greed to vehicle for public good. *The Big Issue*’s story proves just how possible – and essential – that is.

# PREFACE

*A John Bird*

WHEN GORDON RODDICK asked me to start a street paper in March 1991, I had no idea that ten years on it would have such a worldwide presence. Gordon was obsessed with the concept. He had asked me earlier to get involved and I wriggled out of it. I didn't want to get involved with a charity, since it was alien to my sentiments. Later, though, he insisted it would be a business not a charity. Eventually, I agreed and thus began the great adventure.

This book, I believe, shows what an adventure it was. It does not paint *The Big Issue* as a completely formed object in its early stages. It shows the problems we encountered. It shows the mistakes we made. And it shows that both myself and my team learnt on the job.

Learning by doing is certainly one way of achieving your ends. But it can also be wasteful, repetitive and woolly-headed. But without a blueprint to follow, we had little choice. We had to get on with it.

Now, ten years on, *The Big Issue* has become one of the most successful social interventions in living memory. It has kept the tragedy of homelessness to the fore; it has given homeless people the chance of moving out of homelessness; and it has opened up a huge debate around how homeless people need to be involved in their own transformations.

*The Big Issue* remains dynamic and forceful. But like all innovations it has to change, develop and improve in order to continue. More than anything, I believe that this book captures the contradictions of *The Big Issue*. How it bit off more than it could chew. And how it has had to cope with its failures as well as its enormous success.

In a nutshell, *Coming Up From The Streets* is an honest attempt at showing those contradictions. And how 'helping the homeless to help themselves' is its most noteworthy credo.

In reading this book, I hope you will remember the energies and dedication of the thousands of homeless people who have rallied to such a worthwhile effort. Without such dedication, *The Big Issue* would have been dead in the water.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*The Big Issue Is Born – John Bird, Anita Roddick and Sheila McKechnie (front row, top) and Gordon Roddick (far right, bottom) celebrate the magazine's launch in 1991 with some of the first Big Issue vendors*

# INTRODUCTION

*THE BIG ISSUE* is a contradiction and a conundrum. The magazine, sold by homeless people on the streets of cities throughout Britain, has helped thousands of people earn a living since its launch in 1991. It has had a profound and sustained impact on the public's perception of homelessness, combined with an unsentimental and hands-on approach to tackling social exclusion.

It set out to propel people back from the edge into mainstream society. But not simply a job creation scheme, it was about self-esteem, people winning control over their lives, self-help, breaking dependencies and sustainability.

It was one of the most dynamic and exciting publishing phenomenons of the 1990s. *The Big Issue* topped the 1997–98 circulation figures of weekly current affairs magazines in the UK with national sales of 280,000. It has won a whole array of journalistic awards. It is international, with editions in Cape Town, Los Angeles and Melbourne and has led the way for a worldwide street paper movement. From Madrid to Miami and St Petersburg to Serrekunda, street papers are helping thousands of homeless and socially excluded people to help themselves. How this happened is described in this book.

*The Big Issue* was set up as an alternative to the traditional methods of helping homeless people. Its originality was in being a street paper which is sold by people who have an opportunity of moving on and making decisions about their own lives. Spawned by an international company, from an idea that originated in New York, the magazine was put together by a businessman and a printer, neither of whom had a charity background.

Now, the magazine and its vendors feature in TV sitcoms, in Ruth Rendell and Russell Hoban novels, on billboards, in cartoons, corporate advertisements and in school projects. It is supported by big business, the police and government. It has a vibrancy and energy remarked upon by many who come into contact with it. And it is an organization which, while campaign-

ing against homelessness, is also a publishing business, a film maker and a book producer.

In its initial stages, the company staggered along from month to month encountering disasters, financial problems and setbacks, many of which will be described here – often in the words of those involved. The tale of *The Big Issue* is one of meteoric growth combined with amateurish organization, and it still suffers from being thrown together in a hurry. Despite now turning over £4m per annum, the inherent contradictions within the company stoke up an enduring battle to keep its radical edge and yet to ensure the business continues to expand to provide an income for those who need it. *The Big Issue* has been described as having a multiple personality disorder and a split soul.

As described in Chapter 1, conditions for *The Big Issue's* launch in 1991 were ripe, with homelessness at its peak. The public was dissatisfied with the government's response, and single-issue, direct action politics were beginning to replace the more prevalent left-wing politics.

When *The Big Issue* arrived on the scene in September, it entered in methodological opposition to the traditional charity work of handouts and dependency. It brought a businesslike approach to homelessness, encouraging homeless people to think of themselves as consumers. And whilst there are no definitive answers to the social problems the welfare state and voluntary organizations both try to address, there are arguments which may point towards getting rid of the dependency culture, and implementing a more business-like approach to social problems.

This book is predominantly about *The Big Issue* in London because it was the first one, although the four other Big Issues are portrayed in a comparative way. No doubt the founders of the others will write their own stories in time.

### ***The Big Issue***

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# HOMELESSNESS

HOMELESSNESS IN BRITAIN is not new. It has been with us for centuries.

*'Time and time again through the centuries the number of homeless people has increased as a direct result of factors such as economic downturn, the cessation of war and climatic catastrophe. The response of those in authority is to clamp down even harder on the increased numbers 'of no fixed abode', regardless of how valid their reasons may be for having found themselves in their predicament'.<sup>1</sup>*

The patterns of causes have changed over time, but poverty has persisted as a key factor.<sup>2</sup> It is the period between 1979 and the launch of *The Big Issue* in 1991 that concerns this book. This particular phase manifested itself not only in a relentless rise of homelessness in general, but also in an unremitting rise in street homelessness, particularly amongst young people.

Many believe that the fallout from the Tory government's monetarist economic policies created the unemployment (which rose above 3 million) and poverty which caused this particular surge in UK homelessness in the 1980s. The social fracture of Thatcher's Britain reflected itself in frightening statistics. In the ten years to 1989, for example, whilst the annual income of the average UK household increased (and the average income of the richest 20 per cent increased even more), at the lower end of the spectrum average real income dropped.<sup>3</sup> Since then the gap between rich and poor has widened.<sup>4</sup>

Talking of 'The Homeless' became commonplace as they became an established part of our society. All along the Strand, in the heart of the capital, south to Charing Cross and northwards to Lincoln's Inn Fields, hundreds of people were sleeping outdoors: by night in tents, on theatre steps, in cardboard boxes and doorways; by day, begging on the streets.

Not only were people sleeping rough, but hostels and bed and breakfasts were bulging, and thousands of empty buildings were being squatted. Shelter estimated that over half a million people were homeless in England alone in 1991.<sup>5</sup> The government had its own definition of those who were statutorily<sup>6</sup> homeless.<sup>7</sup> In 1991, 170,500 households were accepted as homeless by local authorities.<sup>8</sup> Between 2000 and 3000 were sleeping on the streets of the capital in 1990 and up to 8000 on any one night in England.<sup>9</sup>

There are many reasons why people become homeless. Often homeless people carry the baggage of abuse, poor education and lack of motivation. Those who make up the majority of homeless people, and who are the most vulnerable, are teenagers coming out of care, people who have left the armed forces, ex-prisoners, people with mental health problems, those from broken marriages and relationships, physically abused women or abused young people leaving home and lone parents with their children on low income or on benefits.

Single men are numerically at the top of the list, but they are at the bottom when it comes to priority for housing. They make up the majority of street sleepers. And once on the streets their problems are compounded. Many start drinking or taking drugs, or are already addicted, and their ability to remain motivated gradually disappears. Invisible and marginalized, they are more likely to suffer illness, they are not able to eat properly or economically. They are cut off from their families.

The average life expectancy of a male street sleeper is 42.<sup>10</sup> It is hell out on the streets. Former street sleeper Jim Lawrie says:

*'It's dog eat dog. There's a lot of horrible people amongst those who sleep out as well. I've had things stolen off me, people clout me and all sorts. Why are people like that? It's because they are a product of a society that has failed them. It is not them that has failed. It's society that's failed the homeless. Why have we got so many people with mental health problems living out on the streets?'*

Women tend to work out different ways of staying off the streets, although their number is steadily increasing. They sleep on friends' floors or are trapped in poor accommodation because of low income or violent relationships. Because many are with their children, they have more support in terms of provision of hostel beds and access to bed and breakfast accommodation, but the problems tends to be more 'hidden', or they are not even considered homeless in the public or media's perception.

D (28), a writer who sold *The Big Issue* for three years, was homeless for a couple of years in her mid twenties. Originally from Suffolk, she came to London three years ago, having graduated in social sciences. She is still in contact with her family. She has never had to sleep on the streets and is sometimes challenged about her 'alleged' homelessness. D is typical of the 'hidden,' young, single people who are unable to buy their way into the private market, afford the high rents of the private sector or obtain decent council housing.

She was interviewed by two newspapers. Three other vendors were also interviewed and told their stories, which were quite classic ones. She says:

*'I'm sorry to say that I think they were secretly hoping that my step dad was sexually abusing me and I had to leave home at the age of 13 onto the streets. When I wasn't that, half way through telling my story they stopped me and asked "so have you ever actually been homeless?" and I was cross. I was sleeping on my friend Annie's floor, actually. But I'm lucky, I have always had my mates.'*

Before that, she was squatting. It was not until the good squats ran out, the ones where there used to be a good family-type community, that she actually considered herself to be homeless. She then went to live on various friends' floors. 'It was not having my own space, when I started thinking I might qualify as homeless,' she says. Perhaps it was a lifestyle decision for her?

*'At any point I could have got on the lists as a vulnerable young single female and got stuck into a 'hard to let' flat. I can't think of anything worse. Hell. Stuck in a flat not knowing anyone...'*

She stayed in one squat with no running water, no kitchen, no bathroom, nothing. The rest of the house was disgusting. She adds, 'You could choose the lifestyle to a certain extent but generally you don't choose to live like that. It's not a positive choice.'

D thinks it is important that it is acknowledged that people do not have to be on the streets to have all their confidence stripped away, to feel so completely vulnerable all the time, that they never belong anywhere. That horrible feeling takes a long time to get over.

D's story shows how homelessness is not simply a situation in which someone lacks a roof over their head. People are excluded from being part of a community or a neighbourhood because they lack a stable home. FEANTSA<sup>11</sup> identifies homelessness as 'the most extreme manifestation of social exclusion'.

Besides unemployment and poverty, the bricks and mortar issue is a major contributor to homelessness. Historically, the British housing problem has consisted of the fact that there are far more households than dwellings.<sup>12</sup> Social house building never caught up with housing needs after the Second World War when the shortage of dwellings was estimated at something over 2 million. From the 1960s to around 1990, the numbers of people accepted annually as homeless, that is in temporary accommodation, by local authorities in Britain, multiplied between ten- and twentyfold, depending on the area.<sup>13</sup> Housing aspirations changed too, as young people starting families did not wish to remain in their parents' home. They wanted a home of their own. And by the 1990s, many people decided to live alone. These factors created further pressure on the housing stock.

Britain's deep social inequality is reflected in the tenure of housing. During the last Conservative government, there was a decline in local authority new building to its lowest peace time level since 1920. This decline was complimented by the Thatcher government's policy of encouraging home ownership. Since 1980, there has been such a rapid increase in home ownership that nearly 70 per cent of households in Britain own (or are buying) their homes. The remainder rent from local authorities, housing associations<sup>14</sup> or private landlords. The deregulation of rents in the private sector brought soaring rents and a severe shortage of affordable accommodation became the norm.

The problem for social housing was compounded by the Housing Act of 1980 which gave council tenants the right to buy

their homes at a discount on market rates. Under the 'Right to Buy' legislation social housing stock plummeted from 6.5 million units in 1981 to under 4.5 million by 1997.

It turned out that the best houses were sold, leaving the least desirable to degenerate, creating what are labelled 'sink estates' or 'hard to let accommodation' into which the poorest people or homeless people are placed by the local authorities.<sup>15</sup> As Anne Power explains:

*'Council estates have become increasingly unpopular and stigmatized as they became tied to slum rehousing, then became housing of the last resort for people who might otherwise become homeless. By the eighties, a vast stock of about 10,000 council estates – nearly 4 million homes – was seen as a fail-safe to house the poor in an increasingly unequal society.'*<sup>16</sup>

Then, at the end of the 1980s soaring interest rates affected mortgages (from under 10 per cent in May 1988 to 14.5 per cent by October 1989), resulting for many people in mortgage arrears, repossessions and negative equity. Having been encouraged by the Thatcher government to buy their homes, thousands then lost them when the interest rates were hiked up so sharply, causing increased homelessness.

The public perception of homelessness was focused on its most manifest symptom. It was the visibility of street sleeping, particularly amongst young people, that aroused the public, voluntary sector and some members of the government's concern and therefore brought the whole issue of homelessness into public discussion. Hundreds of people began begging on the streets of London.

Within the voluntary sector and statutory authorities providing services to the homeless, there were also changes. David Warner, former CEO of Homeless Network,<sup>17</sup> was there and says:

*'A number of different things came together during the early eighties that led to the massive explosion of people on the streets in the late eighties. Firstly, the closure programme of old DHSS spikes [hostels for single people], which probably started about 1981/82.'*