

I was first told that the views I held equated to those of the People's Front when writing a book with colleagues in 1999, which considered how, under both the Tories and the start of New Labour, the gap between rich and poor continued to grow. In *The Widening Gap*, we highlighted that New Labour explicitly continued Conservative spending policies for those two years and, once in office, did not enact the key policies to reduce inequalities that it had supported throughout opposition. That gap became a great deal wider in the years that followed.

Perhaps people like me should have shouted a great deal louder rather than wait for the seeds New Labour had sown to bear fruit. A few of those seeds did grow into tall poppies. Success was greatest in reducing some education divides,¹ but inroads into reducing poverty were diminished because incomes were allowed to grow exponentially above those of the poor. And, more critically, Labour introduced and continued to extol a populist and punitive approach, labelling benefit claimants as potentially feckless. Permitting rising inequality and stoking the prejudices of the poor sets a precedent for the next government which heavily outweighs the many gains made.

The most recent suggestion that those who hold views such as mine are misguided was announced in a recent *Guardian* editorial, when it transferred its allegiance to the Liberal Democrats:

Invited to embrace five more years of a Labour government, and of Gordon Brown as Prime Minister, it is hard to feel enthusiasm. Labour's kneejerk critics can sometimes sound like the People's Front of Judea asking what the Romans have ever done for us. The salvation of the health service, major renovation of schools, the minimum wage, civil partnerships and the extension of protection for minority groups are heroic, not small, achievements.²

But, in an affluent country like Britain, should the renovation of state schools be seen as an achievement rather than as business as usual? Similarly, what the *Guardian* calls a 'salvation' – managing to fund a health service still many euros per person cheaper than the European norm – is hardly a staggering feat. And putting in place a minimum wage? Even the USA has had this for many decades. Civil partnerships and removing a little of the bigotry faced by minority groups are important, but obvious, policies. Rather, it would have been heroic to

Mind the gap: New Labour's legacy on child poverty

'What have the Romans ever done for us?' asked the People's Front of Judea in *The Life of Brian's* fictional recording of ungrateful subjects ignoring their rulers' largesse. But what does the People's Front of Judea have to do with modern-day critics of the 1997–2010 New Labour government? Danny Dorling argues what went wrong.



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have reduced income and wealth inequalities (and, by doing so, rates of real poverty). It would have been heroic to have refused to take part in America's wars. It would have been heroic to have reigned in the bankers before the crash.

In comparison with other contemporary governments in the present, with progressive politics in Britain's past, and with the 1997 dream that 'things can only get better', New Labour fell far short.

Here is what Julian Baggini had to say on Labour's record in office in that same issue of the paper:

... I think this has been an under-appreciated government. The last 13 years have been

*immeasurably better than the previous 18, and the return to Conservatism, in its current shape at least, appals me. But the game is up, both for a system which protects two parties which most people do not support, and a government that just cannot now hope to be re-elected with a majority.*³

What do we find when, instead of announcing 'immeasurably better', we measure? Here are my attempts (with the help of many others) to measure this apparently immeasurable betterment.⁴

Among British adults during the 1997–2005 Blair years, the proportion unable to make regular savings rose from 25 per cent to 27 per cent; the number unable to afford an annual holiday away from home rose from 18 per cent to 24 per cent; and the national proportion who could not afford to insure the contents of their home climbed a percentage point, from 8 per cent to 9 per cent. However, these national proportions conceal the way in which the rising exclusion has hit particular groups especially hard, not least a group that the Blair government had said it would help above all others: children living in poverty. Brown was in office too short a time and too recently to make a clear assessment yet of his years. Given that his term ended in recession, the record will not look good. But what of Blair's term that ended at the height of an economic boom?

The comparison of poverty surveys taken towards the start and end of Tony Blair's time in office found that, of all children, the proportion living in a family that could not afford to take a holiday away from home (or just to visit relatives) rose between 1999 and 2005, from 25 per cent to 32 per cent. This occurred even as the real incomes of most of the poorest rose; they just rose more for the affluent, making holidays more expensive for all and subtly changing what it meant to go on holiday. Similarly, as the rich became richer and housing became more expensive and more unequally distributed, the number of school-age children who had to share their bedroom with an adult or sibling over the age of 10 and of the opposite sex rose from 8 per cent to 15 per cent nationally. Encouraging buy-to-let landlords in a new wave of privatisation did not help reduce overcrowding. It was in London that such overcrowding became most acute and where sharing rooms rose most quickly. Keeping up appearances for the poor in London was much harder than in Britain as a whole, not simply because London had less space, but because within London other children were so often very wealthy.

Even among children at the same school, the incomes of their parents had diverged and, consequently, standards of living and expectations of the norm did too. Nationally, the proportion of children who said their parent(s) could not afford to let them have friends round for tea doubled, from 4 per cent to 8 per cent. The proportion who could not afford to pursue a hobby or other leisure activity also rose, from 5 per cent to 7 per cent, and the proportion who could not afford to go on a school trip at least once a term doubled, from 3 per cent to 6 per cent. For children aged below five, the proportion whose parents could not afford to take them to playgroup each week also doubled under the Blair government, from 3 per cent to 6 per cent.

Concealing poverty becomes ever more difficult in an age of consumption and it becomes easier for us to imagine why someone might be tempted to go further into debt in order to pay for a playgroup rather than spend another day at home with a toddler or to pay for a school trip rather than pretend to be ill that day.

One Farepak victim made it clear what growing inequality meant:

*I have got four children, all at various ages. Like I say, you can't tell the little two, Father Christmas can call next door, but he can't call here you know. And with my husband being on sick as well, having to pay the mortgage and feed four kids and whatever, and £37 a week is not a lot.*⁵

The second most expensive of all consumption items are housing costs – rents or mortgages – and these have also diverged as income inequalities have increased. Having to move to a poorer area, or being unable to move out of one, is the geographical reality of social exclusion. People get into further debt trying to avoid this. The most expensive consumer item is a car. The combination of the expense and necessity of car ownership is the reason why not having a car is, for many, a contemporary mark of social failure. It is also closely connected to why so many car firms were badly hit so early on in the crash of 2008, as they were selling debt as much as selling cars. By 2008/09, two out of three children in Britain living in a household without a car were living with only one parent. The chattels and behaviour that signal what it means to be poor change over time and in accordance with what most others have. By 2009, not having a car, like not being able to go on the cheapest of summer holidays, spelled stigma.

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This was the outcome of having a government that was seriously relaxed about the rich becoming richer – ‘as long as they paid their taxes’. (But Labour cut Her Majesty’s Review, thereby reducing tax inspectors’ abilities to chase the rich for their payments.) The gaps between all families grew: celebrity, entrepreneur, affluent, hard-working, a bit slovenly, and down-in-the-mouth. Council housing became social housing (with the word ‘social’s’ implications of charity rather than rights). Taxation became viewed by New Labour as a form of charity, something one did for the poor. Jobseeker’s allowance of £9 a day was fine (as long as one never imagined having to live off it oneself). But charity or child tax credits or Sure Start centres are simply not enough if the income gaps between people are allowed to turn into chasms. Whether our gaps can be considered cracks or chasms can be established by looking at other similarly affluent societies.

International comparisons of the quintile range of income inequality are some of the most telling comparisons that can be made between countries. The best current estimate of UK income inequality on this measure is that, by 2005, the richest fifth received 7.2 times more income on average than the poorest fifth each year – up from 6.9 times in 1997. According to the United Nations Development Programme’s Annual Report (the most widely used source), this ratio was 6.1 to 1 in Ireland, 5.6 to 1 in France, 4.0 to 1 in Sweden and 3.4 to 1 in Japan. By contrast, in the United States that same ratio of inequality is 8.5 to 1. Between 1997 and 2005 the UK moved 0.3 points towards US levels of inequality, or almost one-quarter of the way along the path to becoming as socially unequal as people are in the United States.⁶

The gulfs between our worlds are so wide that comparisons are rarely made between the lives of the richest and poorest on the planet. Worldwide, the poorest tenth will die having hardly left a scratch on the earth. The richest tenth will each individually consume more oil through travel and minerals through gadgets than dozens of previous generations of their own families ever did, at least six times more each than their already affluent parents. In doing so, they consume the vast majority of all the resources that are consumed worldwide. It is precisely because it has become normal in affluent countries to consume, to want so much more than our parents had, especially if our parents were rich, that escapism has taken hold.

Have we all become too apathetic and individualistic? What do we do when we have all our televisions, cars and holidays, when our home is full of possessions that cost such huge amounts? The answer is: we begin to live in fear. We move to what we perceive are safer and safer environments. Eventually, we end up with a home in a gated estate, a gilded cage for the new gilded age. Our visitors must check in with guards before they can get to our door. Our children are too afraid to go outside the gates to play. They watch television.

People in Britain care; rich business people often care; the great and the good of New Labour mostly cared. But caring is not enough if our thinking has been rewired by too many years of living under growing inequality and growing poverty. That time is coming to an end. The people who make up what is left of the party that governed until 6 May 2010 mostly know that it made huge mistakes, that what it did was not enough compared with what most other politicians in most other affluent countries in the world achieve today – not enough compared with what the 1906 or 1910 or 1945 or 1964 or even the 1974 governments achieved, all with less time and much less money. And most importantly of all, not enough... *for what they dreamed of.*⁷ ■

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For a longer and better referenced version of this argument and accounting, see *Injustice: why social inequality persists*, Policy Press, 2010

- 1 D Dorling, ‘Expert View: one of Labour’s great successes’, the *Guardian*, 28 January 2010, p10
- 2 www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/30/the-liberal-moment-has-come
- 3 Quoted in part in the *Guardian*, 1 May 2010, p37 and in full at www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/30/lib-dems-tories-election
- 4 The sources for all these facts are in *Injustice: why social inequality persists*, Policy Press, 2010, pp117-143
- 5 B Spalek and S King, *Farepak Victims Speak Out: an exploration of the harms caused by the collapse of Farepak*, 2007. See www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/opus419/Farepak_Web_Final.pdf. For the full report, see www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/farepakvictims.html. In April 2010, ‘customers who paid for hampers from Farepak are expected to receive less than £50 each, even as accountants and lawyers handling the liquidation rack up millions in fees’, the *Times*, 27 April 2010 and <http://business.timesonline.co.uk>
- 6 The change in the post-tax income ratios can be calculated from figures given in A Stratton, ‘Lib Dems to accuse Labour of failing to deliver fair taxes’, the *Guardian*, 11 April 2010 and at www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/apr/11/liberal-democrats-labour-unfair-taxes
- 7 ‘For What You Dream Of’ is a song written by John Digweed, Nick Muir and Carol Leeming which appeared in the sound track of the film *Trainspotting*, released a year before New Labour came to power. It begins, ‘When the taking on the giving starts to get too much’.

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