

Opportunity and aspiration: two sides of the same coin?

Viewpoint
Informing debate

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The JRF's recent public consultation revealed a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. This *Viewpoint* continues the discussion about modern 'social evils' on the theme of 'inequality'. Chris Creegan argues that until we can reconcile the problems of excessive individualism, consumerism and greed at the heart of contemporary society, life opportunities will continue to be lost, limited and wasted.

Key points

- During people's lives, opportunities can be truncated: lost, limited or wasted through circumstances and events that they have varying degrees of control over.
- Truncation of opportunity prevents aspirations from being realised. The relationship between opportunity and aspiration is a more level playing field for some of us than for others.
- We need to reframe the relationship between opportunity and aspiration – thinking not only about the opportunities and aspirations of individual citizens, but also of society as a whole.
- We cannot achieve this without listening to people whose voices are not usually heard, including those directly affected by the inequality caused by truncated opportunity.
- Truncation of opportunity can take many forms. For example, opportunities can be lost in old age, limited by caring responsibilities, or wasted through drug or alcohol misuse.
- The reality is that, whether loss of opportunity is caused by imposed constraints or individual choices, if you are disadvantaged through poverty and inequality the limitations imposed are greater and the escape routes fewer.
- While poverty of aspiration is a serious problem, impoverished aspiration can also fuel excessive individualism, consumerism and greed, which exacerbates inequality.
- Reframing the relationship between opportunity and aspiration must include listening to those with experience of truncated opportunity.
- Democracy is becoming deeply eroded. Making sure everyone votes provides a democratic safety net and is one important way of eliciting voices which are often unheard.
- We need a society where individual aspirations for a better life and shared aspirations for equality are not mutually exclusive, but two sides of the same coin.

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Introduction

My starting point for this piece is the notion of ‘truncated opportunities’, the idea that over the course of life opportunities can be lost, limited or wasted through circumstances and events that we have varying degrees of control over. I will argue that, in order to address the inequalities created and exacerbated by truncation of opportunity, we need to reframe the relationship between opportunity and aspiration. And in doing so, we need not only to think about the opportunities (good chances or prospects) and aspirations (strong desires or aims) of individual citizens, but of society as a whole. There is a vast array of theoretical and empirical literature on these issues, particularly (in)equality of opportunity. This piece is not intended to challenge the validity of the arguments within that literature. Rather it takes the opportunity afforded by involvement in some recent research commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)¹ to view these issues through a new lens.

The idea of ‘truncated opportunities’ is not merely an abstract one. It comes from eliciting the voices of people we do not usually hear. We do hear about these people. We design interventions for them. We talk to them in relation to services – as recipients, non-recipients and potential recipients. We have specific labels for them: sometimes labels that they in part use themselves as in ‘carers’, sometimes labels we have bestowed upon them as in ‘NEETs’ (people not in education, employment or training). Sometimes we remember they are people first – ‘people with learning difficulties’, for example. Sometimes we don’t – ‘the unemployed’, ‘the homeless’ or ‘the elderly’, for example. We categorise them, for example as the ‘hard-to-reach’ and the ‘chronically socially excluded’.

But how much do we know about their lives? How often do we ask them about their lives? I don't mean their experiences as claimants, as service users or as receivers of programmes. And neither do I mean about very specific moments in their lives that we have deemed to be relevant to designing an intervention or the introduction of legislation, such as a lone mother's experience of the birth registration process.² As social researchers or policy officials, or even as practitioners at the coal face, how often do we ask people to tell us about their hopes, fears and aspirations, beyond the aspects of deficit within their lives which bring them into contact with organisations tasked with meeting their needs?

From my experience as a social policy researcher, the answer is actually not very often. I've conducted some fascinating policy-focused research with people whose voices would not necessarily otherwise be heard – vulnerable young people, unmarried parents and people facing discrimination at work. Such research is, of course, vital. I think it's morally right to ensure that policy and practice are based on sound evidence. And I think it can help to make the world a better place. Before I became a social policy researcher I was a trade union official and I've been a local councillor. My involvement in social research stems from the same moral convictions and ethical concerns that motivated that activism. I'm not simply in the business of representing the world for the sake of it. I'm doing so because I want to change it, or at least provide others with the knowledge to do so.

The bounded nature of social research can be frustrating. At the end of an interview the digital recorder is put back in my bag, the consent form is signed and the respondent is reminded of the confidentiality and anonymity of the process. And then sometimes (not all the time) I want to stay, usually because I feel I've established a rapport which has a significance that goes beyond the objectives of the research project. Whether the respondent shares that feeling is a moot point. But I want to know more, perhaps like a social historian. I want to intervene, perhaps like a foster carer. Of course I don't, because that would corrupt the whole process both ethically and methodologically and because it's not my role. Staying on to find out more about the person's life or even get involved in it would transform the relationship created by the encounter. It's therefore something for a different kind of project.

Unusually with the JRF research, I was able to be part of a team that went out to elicit the voices of people who fall into these categories in relation to a simple, open-ended question that enabled them to talk about their lives. The question was: "What do you think are today's social evils?" And then, for the most part, our task was to get them to talk some more on their own terms, not in relation to a detailed topic guide or questionnaire with themes and sub-themes pre-determined in relation to the research commissioner's objectives.

The question was of course pre-determined. We might, for example, have asked people "what do you think are today's social goods?" And some of the follow-up questions were also scripted, particularly in the second phase of the research: "how do you cope with these things?" and "what do you think should be done about them?" But the questions asked were broad and open-ended. And to really understand what lay behind people's initial responses, we had to enable them to talk freely about things that had happened in their lives. What happened next was perhaps not surprising given the people we were talking to. They talked to us about hopes and aspirations that had not been realised. They talked of opportunities and chances that had been limited, lost or even wasted. And so we used the term 'truncated opportunities' to describe their experiences. This one key finding, let alone the rich and varied accounts which came from talking to those who might otherwise have been unheard, justified the research approach taken by JRF. It also raises a crucial question: how can we ensure that such views are elicited, heard and acted upon, not merely in social research but in the body politic? This is something to which I will return later.

In one sense there is, of course, nothing new about this notion of truncated opportunities. Discussion of life chances and the need to ensure they are improved and equalised has (rightly) been plentiful, particularly in recent years with renewed debate on child poverty. The Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty³ for example, offered an important and timely opportunity to explore those issues at the start of Labour's third term in 2005. In another sense, there is nothing new about observing such poverty and exclusion at first hand. In the late 1980s, Robert Wilson and Donovan Wylie chronicled what they saw as the reality of poverty in Britain at the end of the Thatcher era, in London, Glasgow and Belfast.⁴ They spent time in those places writing about and photographing what they saw. There is a rawness and an authenticity to their accounts, which we could never achieve through the lens of a series of focus groups. But the notion of 'truncated opportunities' is significant because it is borne out in the accounts of people for whom the manifestations of social evils such as poverty and inequality, drugs and alcohol and crime and violence were interwoven into the fabric of their daily lives. Their accounts vividly conveyed a sense of loss and waste which truncation of opportunity can provoke. And their accounts were a direct and personal response to the question "what is causing the most misery and the most damage in British society today?"

Because this is a thinkpiece and not a review of research or an academic article, I am not intending to discuss or duplicate the vast array of literature that debates the causes of such limitation of opportunity among the sorts of people that we spoke to. It is, however, important to say at the outset that the notion of 'truncated opportunities' that emerged from the accounts of those we spoke to is not simply about inequality of opportunity, poverty or life chances. Of course it's related to all of those things. These were mostly poorer people not merely in terms of income but also, for example, in terms of participation and access to services. And they were people who had experienced inequality. In some cases they were people who, by any standard, had faced unequal life chances from the very start. But the stories of loss, waste and limiting of opportunities were threaded through people's lives and had been triggered at different life stages, by events or

circumstances over which they had varying degrees of control. They related both to external or societal and internal or personal constraints to opportunity. External constraints could include lack of affordable housing or jobs, while internal constraints could include caring responsibilities or mental health problems. This is an important distinction, though arguably artificial and blurred in the real-life experiences of constraints to opportunity.

Opportunities were not only curtailed at the beginning of life by, for example, being born into poverty or born with learning difficulties. They had also been lost or wasted across the course of life because of circumstances which had arisen (having to care for someone or becoming homeless) or personal actions (drug and alcohol misuse). The relationship between truncated opportunity and social evil was complex because the former could both result from and give rise to the latter, often within a single lifetime. The extent to which the impact of reduced opportunity had been mitigated, either within the personal or public domain, varied considerably. Room's conceptual framework, using ideas of snakes, ladders, passports and buffers to describe a dynamic view of processes of social exclusion⁵ is interesting here in terms of the potential role of agencies in relation to individuals. Agencies may offer resources and relationships, which can offer ladders out of exclusion if aided by passports, or which offer only snakes leading to social exclusion unless inhibited by buffers.

Three further points arise from the accounts of truncated opportunity revealed by our research. First, establishing the counterfactual in relation to restricted opportunity is very difficult. How can we know what the outcome would have been if opportunities had been given or taken? Second, if we were able to mitigate truncation of opportunity (to eradicate it seems an Utopian ideal) would the opportunities given to or taken by people enable their aspirations to be met? And what does this mean for the ongoing debate about poverty of aspiration? Third, it is worth reflecting that truncated opportunities may not always be seen or experienced as negative. Indeed, as one door closes in life, another door may open. However, the particular experiences that inspired the notion of truncated opportunities did convey a sense of waste within the lives of individuals and for society as a whole.

In order to explore this further, I want to turn briefly to some current examples of lost, limited and wasted opportunities and an example of the role of aspiration in contemporary Britain. These examples are inevitably highly selective and are intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. They are also based on my own interpretation. While some of those we spoke to during the JRF research did describe their lives in these terms, the examples explored here are based on my own rethinking and reworking of the idea. The application of the labels 'lost', 'limited' and 'wasted' is part of that process, and it is not intended to suggest that they are mutually exclusive. Indeed, in the context of real lives, they may be fluid and interchangeable. In considering these examples I will touch on some of the things we could do differently as a society that might alleviate reduction of opportunity. I am assuming at the outset, therefore, that we should aspire to take such a course.

Opportunities lost: older people

I want to talk about opportunities lost for older people for two reasons. First, as I've already said, 'truncated opportunities' is a notion that spans the entire course of life. Opportunities can be lost in later life partly because major life events such as widowhood can cause 'cycles of decline'.⁶ Second, so much attention around chances and opportunities is (rightly) focused on the start of life and child poverty. Over the last few years a whole series of strategy documents have been produced concerning older people. 'Opportunity age: Meeting the challenges of ageing in the 21st century', published by Department for Work and Pensions in 2005, and 'A new ambition for old age: Next steps in implementing the National Service Framework for Older People', published by Department of Health in 2006, are just two examples. But how much attention have they received?

Using data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), which is a large-scale survey of people aged 50 and over living in England, recent research has set out to strengthen existing knowledge about the particular experiences of exclusion among older people.⁷ It measured the patterns of different forms of social exclusion and examined the key risk factors, or indicators, of social exclusion among older people. The results were shameful. Over two million people of pension age live in poverty. Around 30 per cent of people over 65 years old do not see any friends at least once a week. Approximately one-third of people living in 'non-decent' homes are aged 60 years or over.

Yet what has happened? Have we seen a 'Sure Start' programme rolled out for older people? What might have happened if 'Every Older Person Matters' had become common currency in the way that 'Every Child Matters' has, with all the attendant strategies and plethora of outcome measures and targets? What might have happened if we had seen the creation of a Department of Older People, Pensions and Well-being to mirror the Department of Children, Schools and Families? Why is Wales the only part of the UK to date to have appointed an Older People's Commissioner?⁸ Of course, the answer is that some important initiatives have happened. But the sheer invisibility of older people's needs and experiences compared to those at other stages of life does convey a sense that as a society we don't care enough.

The loss of opportunities for people in later life has a multiplicity of negative impacts on their health and well-being, their exclusion from social networks and cultural activities and their participation in wider society. The consequences though are surely much greater than the impact on older people themselves, because society loses too. By focusing more on older people's (real) need for care than on their potential contribution, we are all the losers. Older people surely have a wealth of experience, knowledge and wisdom that we can benefit from, and by tapping into it we enable them to flourish, notwithstanding the frailty and need that often comes with old age. Advancing age should not inevitably and unnecessarily reduce opportunity, but for those who are poorer in particular it will do so unless we take steps to prevent it.

Opportunities limited: carers

The plight of those left to care is not new. Radclyffe Hall's 1924 novel *The Unlit Lamp* movingly tells the story of a woman who sacrifices her chance of happiness in order to stay with her mother. The responsibility of caring for someone can happen at any stage during life. At one end of the spectrum, it is estimated that 1.5 million people who are over the age of 60 are carers in Britain.⁹ Many have spent years bringing up children only to find, as their children grow up and retirement approaches, that what life now holds in store is looking after a parent. Over 8,000 carers are aged 90 years and above, and 4,000 of these much older carers provide 50 or more hours of care each week. Some of those most in need of care themselves are left to care for others. Older carers are often in poor health themselves, usually living with a partner who is sometimes still in paid work, and highly concentrated in areas affected by socio-economic deprivation.

At the other end of the spectrum, Carers UK estimated that there are around 175,000 young carers in the UK. Among the many negative impacts of the caring role, at whatever stage in life it takes place, are limited opportunities for social and leisure activities and limited horizons and aspirations.¹⁰ For older and young people alike it can be an isolating and excluding experience. The carer role is one that many people choose out of love for a partner or family member, but it is also one they get tied into as a result of obligation and the lack of viable alternatives. These things are not mutually exclusive. As Phillipa Russell, chair of the Standing Commission on Carers says, in the past becoming a carer could feel like 'the end of the road'. But now family carers expect to be able to support their relatives and to ensure they have the best possible care, but also be able to get on with their own lives.¹¹

A Carers UK study highlights the extent of the limitations placed on carers' lives. It estimates that 80 per cent of carers are of working age, but that 58 per cent of them give up work because of their caring responsibilities.¹² The study revealed that, as well as giving up work and sacrificing their pensions, carers are having to sell their homes and cut back on food, heating and clothes. This leaves many deeply anxious about their financial future. An Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) report estimates that last year carers unable to work lost out on £5 billion of potential earnings. Yet, in contrast, the Carers UK study estimated that their support is worth £87 billion per year to the state.

The Carers (Equal Opportunities) Act 2004 was designed to ensure that carers are able to take up the opportunities that people without caring responsibilities often take for granted, such as working, studying or leisure activities. It places duties on local authorities and the NHS. But is it really enough? The report recently launched by the IPPR suggests not. It argues that carers need independence, choice and control as well, and that a carer's budget would recognise carers' needs as individuals and open up opportunities for them to balance care with paid work for example.¹³ Caring for someone should not inevitably and unnecessarily truncate opportunity, but it does for those without the resources to pay for private care.

Opportunities wasted: drug and alcohol misuse

My own organisation, NatCen, has recently been involved in the Drug Treatment Outcomes Research Study¹⁴ designed to update existing knowledge on the effectiveness of drug treatment in England. The sample of drug treatment seekers in the study is broadly representative of all drug treatment seekers in England. And it fits with our understanding of the relationship between multiple deprivation and chronic social exclusion. Most treatment seekers (77 per cent) were unemployed and 38 per cent had left school before the age of 16. Crack cocaine use was common (44 per cent), associated with higher levels of criminality, poorer health and recent psychiatric treatment, and apparently associated with ethnic group.

In fact, we make matters worse by pathologising and criminalising poor people who are addicted to drugs such as crack. Meanwhile, its more sophisticated sister, cocaine, as one commentator observed, “enjoys a strong prestige positioning, thanks to decades of countless, usually inadvertent, celebrity endorsements.”¹⁵ At the extremes, for middle-class people drug use is more likely to be ‘recreational’ and relatively harmless. But for working-class people drug use has greater potential to become a way a way of life associated with a vicious cycle of criminal behaviour, in which they are both perpetrator and victim. We may be living in a classless society where political ideology is concerned, but in the illegal drugs market the class system is alive and kicking. While drug use can restrict the life opportunities of middle-class people, they have a greater resilience to addiction and a better safety net to rely on if they do succumb to it. And the extent to which it is interwoven with criminal behaviour is reduced by its relative affordability for those who are better off.

In short, middle-class people have a bigger buffer zone and are more likely to get a second chance. They can afford to waste opportunities, because the chances are that these opportunities will come around again. So, as with alcohol (mis)use, the prevailing narrative about drug (mis)use is confused. At its most extreme this means that some middle-class people want protection from the rampant criminal behaviour which is associated with drug misuse, but want the freedom to dabble in drug use at the weekends with impunity.

It could be argued that such confusion is confined to a small minority. But if we focus on alcohol rather than drugs, the confusion arguably becomes greater. It has been suggested that the current Home Secretary is happy to crack down on the hundreds of thousands who use cannabis socially, but as long as ‘booze’ remains the drug of choice of *Daily Mail* readers, she is not going to criminalise middle-class people whose fix is available at bargain prices in supermarkets.¹⁶ Why? Because drinking has become part of a sophisticated lifestyle that we aspire to. We want to be able to drink outside and at all hours in continental-style café bars. Health Minister Dawn Primarolo “recently warned that the UK’s real drink problem was among middle-class, middle-aged bingers who glug their way through a bottle of wine of an evening.”¹⁷

For the playwright Simon Gray, who sadly died recently, alcoholism resulted in drinking several bottles of champagne a day over many years, until the doctor ordered him to stop. Asked if he regretted his drinking years, he said: “No, no, I had wonderful times while I was drinking. And I wrote a lot of my plays when I was pretty well drunk. I think it somehow liberated one.”¹⁸ Such accounts are the exception rather than the rule, however, and give the lie to the appalling waste that alcohol addiction generates. And of course the real casualties of alcoholism, whose lives are blighted rather than liberated, are those whose drink of choice (through financial necessity) is ‘White Lightning’ cider rather than champagne.

So if drug and alcohol misuse truncate opportunities, what should we do about them? If the real problems are poverty and inequality, does it matter what approach we take to enforcement and prohibition? In fact might it be better to legalise drugs? There is a body of opinion that thinks so, including some senior police officers, while others have argued that it is a 'counsel of despair'.¹⁹ Whatever your point of view, it is clear that the confused narrative at the heart of the national debate about drugs and alcohol requires a cultural shift to tackle the waste caused by misuse, not merely enforcement and prohibition. Unless this happens, drug and alcohol misuse will continue to lead to wasted opportunities and will do so disproportionately amongst those who are less well off.

Aspirations: housing tenure

I want to turn now from the notion of opportunity to that of aspiration. The phrase 'poverty of aspiration' has become common currency in the past few years. That it exists and helps to perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality is surely undeniable. But aspiration can also fuel excessive individualism, greed and consumerism. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have somehow lulled ourselves into a false consciousness whereby those who 'have' can have more and more, and where aspiration has no limits because its realisation has no impact beyond our own lives. Apparently, therefore, we can acquire more without having to pay any more and no one will come to any harm as a result. Perhaps the most potent symbol of this is the current housing crisis in the UK. As I write this piece, the private housing market in the UK is, according to some commentators, on the brink of collapse – "a 'house of cards' that is set to implode after years of reckless mortgage lending, chronic oversupply of new flats and widespread fraud," according to one analyst.²⁰

It has been suggested that promoting home ownership is about addressing inequalities as well as aspirations, and that when done alongside extending housing supply and improving access to social housing, it forms a vital part of a programme to widen life chances for all.²¹

Making these assertions in 2005, Yvette Cooper acknowledged that the tightening housing market had contributed to rising prices and a situation where those inside the housing market had seen their assets grow. Much of this is undeniably true, but the assertion that promoting home ownership is about addressing inequalities is questionable. In one sense of course it is, since absolute equality in the housing market would mean that everyone would have the opportunity to own their own home. In another sense, it exposes a fundamental fault-line which has long been at the heart of housing policy, and which has gathered pace since the early 1980s, whereby social housing is seen as inferior to home ownership. Social housing is not seen as aspirational. It is a safety net, something that those who cannot afford their own homes hope for if they are lucky, although in reality the quality is variable.

During the recent housing boom, some people made huge profits by selling their houses. For those who were lucky enough to sell before the current crisis, those profits materialised. "Deluded by house prices, British consumers had borrowed and spent like there was no tomorrow", Iain Macwhirter pointed out recently in the *New Statesman*.²² But for those who did not sell before the crisis, "tomorrow has arrived and consumers are sitting on £1.4 trillion of debt, the highest for any country in the world." For those in social housing there is a different sorry tale. The socio-economic characteristics of those living in different housing tenures have changed dramatically in the last 25 years. Those in social housing are now disproportionately represented in the lowest income groups, have much higher levels of unemployment and long-term economic activity. They face multiple, severe barriers or difficulties in the labour market, including ill-health.²³ We can also be pretty confident that home ownership affects the causes of social mobility, including educational attainment and childhood poverty, while social housing has become associated with downward mobility.²⁴

This is all a far cry from the post-war vision for housing, which recognised the need for mixed neighbourhoods. How did it come to this? It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that excessive individualism and greed have fuelled these changes. Those of us who could afford to were happy to see the value of our homes rise exponentially, and in some cases use the profits to buy second properties. Our greed was such that, not content with being a nation of homeowners, we seemed to want to become a nation of landlords. And yet we knew this was a divided nation, in which those inside the market knew that our actions were pricing others out. And meanwhile social housing became entrenched as second best, a symbol of misfortune rather than aspiration.

Is it really so absurd to suggest that middle-class people might in some circumstances actually prefer to opt for social housing as a choice that fits with their aspirations in terms of quality of life? In the recent past, the answer appears to have been 'yes', at least in part because of the potential for increased personal wealth (and perceived security) attached to home ownership. Perhaps now, as we are on the brink of the second housing crash in 20 years, we might pause to think again about what sort of housing policy would really benefit the whole of society, as opposed to one section of it, even if that section does constitute the many as opposed to the few. The failure to develop a credible and equitable housing strategy is one of the biggest disappointments of the Labour government since 1997. A new vision for housing, which includes a radical overhaul of both the private and social housing sectors, and places home ownership and social housing on an equal footing not merely in terms of location but in terms of opportunity and aspiration, is long overdue. Without such a vision, the chances and prospects of some will continue to be truncated, while the ambitions of the better off will be realised. And each time there is a downturn (let alone a crash) it will be those for whom the gap between opportunity and aspiration is widest who will suffer first.

Alleviating truncated opportunity and reframing aspiration

Threaded through these examples and the stories elicited by our research is a shared experience of the impact of poverty and inequality on opportunity and aspiration. For me this begs the question, how far we have really moved on from the predicament identified by Joseph Rowntree a century ago?²⁵ He argued then that "philanthropic effort was directed to remedying the more superficial manifestations of weakness or evil, while little thought or effort was directed to search out their underlying causes." My concern here is twofold. First, there is increasingly a mismatch between our individual aspirations and the opportunities that can realistically be afforded to us if we genuinely aspire to a more equal society. Second, we appear unwilling as a society, and unable through our political system, to really confront the relationship between poverty, inequality and truncated opportunities. And so our philanthropic efforts continue, well-intentioned and sometimes very well resourced. But there is an implicit acceptance that loss of opportunity is inevitable and that a degree of inequality is quite simply okay.

The reality is that, whether loss of opportunity is caused by something done to you, something that happens to you or something that you choose to do, if you are disadvantaged through poverty and inequality the limitations imposed are greater and the escape routes fewer. This is particularly the case if that disadvantage is chronic and multiple. So why can't we do more as a society to alleviate the truncation of opportunity? The JRF social evils consultation revealed a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. Among the key concerns highlighted by respondents about how we seem to live our lives today were a decline of community and values and an increase in individualism, consumerism and greed.

These concerns are big subjects in their own right. What each of them constitutes is of course open to interpretation, and is addressed in other *Viewpoints* in this series. However, I mention them because my contention is that our collective failure as a society to take responsibility for these concerns is one of the things that renders us incapable of dealing with 'truncated opportunities'. This is not to deny the importance of individual agency and responsibility. And of course disadvantage does not negate responsibility. Indeed, respondents in our research spoke eloquently about their own sense of personal responsibility and disappointment with their actions. Neither is it to suggest that the interventions we have collectively designed as a society to respond to the manifestations of poverty and inequality are not well intentioned or necessary. Arguably we all have a responsibility, regardless of circumstance, to ensure that our aspirations are not shaped by individualism, consumerism and greed. But we need to bear in mind that for some of us the relationship between opportunity and aspiration is a more level playing field than for others.

I do, however, suggest that until we can reconcile the excesses of individualism, consumerism and greed which are at the heart of the current social, economic and indeed wider political settlement in British society, life opportunities will continue to be lost, limited and wasted. And because this will disproportionately affect the lives of poorer and more vulnerable people, we will continue to turn the other way. This leads to the inescapable conclusion that "some lives", as the late David Widgery movingly conveyed²⁶ are ultimately expendable. We must remain alert to the pernicious effect of poverty of aspiration, whether caused or perpetuated by lack of opportunity. But we must also reframe the meaning of aspiration which has become impoverished by contemporary excesses. And when we talk about poverty of aspiration, we need to think not merely about enriching the aspirations of individuals, but also our collective aspirations as a society. This challenge has been referred to by the RSA as closing the 'social aspiration gap'. Without a shared aspiration for equality, individual opportunities will continue to be truncated. That means facing up to the consequences of excessive individualism, consumerism and greed individually and collectively.

Conclusion – eliciting unheard voices

My final argument returns to the importance of eliciting unheard voices. Reframing the relationship between opportunity and aspiration has to be an inclusive process and that means listening to those with experience of truncated opportunity, particularly those with fewer escape routes. To do that successfully we will need to elicit previously unheard voices. In a small but not insignificant way, this is what the Joseph Rowntree Foundation set out to do with the ‘social evils’ project. But how might we ensure that the business of hearing those voices is embedded in our democratic processes? The recent White Paper focused on empowering citizens looks set to provide a welcome emphasis on active citizenship, and improving local public services by involving users and strengthening local accountability.²⁷ But such measures aside, my view is that taking a hard look at who votes and whether their votes really count is one important place to start.

In the ever more competitive race to chase the middle-class vote and occupy the centre ground of British politics, turnout has plummeted and those at the margins all too often go unheard. Their votes, like their opportunities, have become expendable. It is true that since 1997 Labour’s focus on social exclusion and child poverty, and latterly on chronic and multiple exclusion in particular, represents a very serious and genuine attempt to improve life chances and opportunities, and create a more equal society. It is also true that the recent emphasis on social justice by the Conservative Party is a welcome step. But have such developments placed sufficient emphasis on enabling the active citizenship of those who are socially excluded as well as intervening in their lives? The worrying truth is that another reason why their voices go unheard is that they don’t necessarily even vote in the first place, or see any point in doing so. Indeed, it’s been argued very persuasively that what should concern us most is not falling turnout in elections, but unequal turnout.

Put simply: “Elections are about influence. Voice is power.”²⁸ Ben Rogers has argued that the need to boost turnout among disadvantaged groups means that the time has come to give very serious thought to compulsory voting, or at least compulsory attendance at the polling station or compulsory filling out of a postal form. Why? Because evidence suggests that, in increasing participation at the ballot box, compulsory voting narrows the gap between the rich and poor vote. The “gain to democracy” would, in Rogers’ view, be great, while the “loss to liberty” would be negligible.

Truncation of opportunity is not simply about the divide between rich and poor, but that divide does thread through it. Some of those whose opportunities are lost, limited and wasted may well vote or get involved more than others, but are their votes fought for? Are they able to make a difference? We are rightly proud of the British democratic tradition. And yet I fear that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are sleepwalking into a democracy that is becoming deeply eroded – a democracy where some voices simply don’t matter. Compulsory voting is not a panacea, but it could provide a vital democratic safety net. To alleviate, let alone eradicate, truncation of opportunity, we need a democracy where everyone’s voice is heard. And we need to become a society where individual aspirations for a better life and shared aspirations for equality are not mutually exclusive, but two sides of the same coin.

Footnotes

1. Alice Mowlam and Chris Creegan, *Modern-day social evils: the voices of unheard groups*. York: JRF
2. J. Graham *et al.* (2007) *Sole and joint birth registration: Exploring the circumstances, choices and motivations of unmarried parents*, Department for Work and Pensions
3. 'Why Life Chances Matter: The interim report of the Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty' (2005), *Fabian ideas* Vol. 616. London: Fabian Society
4. Robert Wilson and Donovan Wylie (1992) *The Dispossessed*. London: Picador
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6. 'A Sure Start to Later Life: Ending Inequalities for Older People', Social Exclusion Unit, 2006
7. The social exclusion of older people: evidence from the first wave of the English longitudinal study on ageing (ELSA) (2006). DCLG
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9. Lisa Buckner and Sue Yeandle (2005) *Older Carers in the UK*. Sheffield Hallam University
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