

Five types of inequality

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'. Ferdinand Mount takes a wide view of the causes and possible cures of injurious inequalities, looking at five overlapping types of inequalities and how to remedy them.

Key points

- Equality is a core value of both the Christian and Western democratic tradition. Much has been achieved in the field of legal and civic equality, but historically such economic levelling in Britain has resulted from the cost pressures of war rather from deliberate political design.
- Britain made great strides to achieving equality of opportunity in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century but is no longer progressing, partly because we have failed to address the other aspects of inequality which are also to blame for the feelings of estrangement and resentment to be found among the worst-off.
 - Political, legal or civic equality has been largely achieved, although democratic reform is needed to encourage equal and effective participation.
 - Equality of outcome has not been achieved. The tax system needs to be reformed so that the poorest do not pay an unfair share of tax or face a climbing marginal tax rate.
 - Equality of opportunity or levelling of life chances has in practice been the prime social goal of most post-war British governments, but it is losing purchase, because of the failure to think about financial and legal independence for institutions.
 - Equality of treatment or responsibility has not been achieved. We need to abolish as far as possible all those forms of unequal treatment such as the means test, which undermine a sense of agency and self-worth. At the same time, we must give the worst off the maximum scope for making their own decisions about housing, schooling etc.
- We must also consider shared equality of membership in the areas of nation, faith and family. Shoring up these memberships must also be part of an agenda which fosters a genuine sense of equality amongst all citizens.

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Introduction

The subject of inequality has come back to nag at our consciences and baffle our political energies. Of course, it never really went away. Ever since the Second World War, in the guise of equality of opportunity, it has been the guiding motive of successive British governments. The general sense of a shared mission led to something dangerously close to complacency. We were, it seemed, steadily if slowly moving in the right direction. Our parents, let alone our grandparents, would have been impressed to see the progress we had made towards equalising life chances. The only argument was about the average speed and the right time to change gear.

Now we are not so sure of ourselves. The statistics tell us that social mobility has more or less ground to a halt. Rather than congregating around the median point and so generating one giant middle class, incomes seem to be polarising and threatening to form a society that looks less like a diamond than an hourglass or a dumb-bell. A society divided into what I call 'uppers' and 'downers': the former full of confidence and looking to the future, the other desperately trying to cling on to what little they have got. For behind the statistics we glimpse the formation of a demoralised underclass, deprived in both cultural and material terms, and a good deal larger than we hoped. As an economic nation we are confident and energetic, more so than we have been in living memory. In social terms, by contrast, we are rather uneasy, perhaps more uneasy than at any time since the Second World War. That unease was exhibited at the official level by the creation of a Social Exclusion Unit in the Cabinet Office. And it was embodied in legislation by the invention of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), an Orwellian concept that enables the authorities to designate any kind of behaviour as intolerable and to devise any penalty for it that comes into their heads. For the first time since the Middle Ages, the truculent and fractious members of society are to be punished for sins which have no precise legal definition. In fact, these 'downers' are not to be treated as members of society at all but as outlaws.

Inequality is tricky terrain. I am not sure whether to describe it as a quagmire or a minefield. Perhaps it is both, rather like parts of the battlefield of the First World War: a treacherous swamp which is at the same time sown with unexploded bombs and crisscrossed by ancient trenches, some now crumbling and unoccupied, others still fiercely defended, sometimes occupied by enemy forces since the battle lines have swung to and fro. Arguments about equality have gone on so long, and aroused such fierce feelings, that anyone venturing into this particular 'no-man's-land' needs to tiptoe.

Much of the confusion is due to the assumption shared by many of the combatants that equality and inequality are simple and easily defined concepts, whereas they seem to me to be slippery and complex. To begin to untangle the muddle, I suggest that we divide inequality into five rough types. These may overlap and bleed into each other, or conflict and slide past one another, but defining them will help us to see how remedies for the injurious aspects of inequality will themselves need to be quite intricate.

Five types of inequality:

- political equality, in which I include civic equality and equality before the law;
- equality of outcome or result, by which we mean primarily equality of income and wealth;
- equality of opportunity, these days often called equality of access or of life chances;
- a less examined idea, equality of treatment, which can be taken to include or at least help to generate equality of agency and responsibility; and
- finally, a type which is not often recognised as a kind of equality at all, equality of membership in society.

To be clear where we are, I think we need to have some rough idea where we have come from. Not only do we need to say something about the history of these arguments, we also need to sketch out, however briefly, some of the philosophical problems as well as the political problems that will crop up.

Political equality – the long struggle

First then, we need to remember that equality is a core principle of Western civilisation. This is true both of our dominant political tradition and of our dominant religious tradition. The equality of citizens was a basic element in the rise of the Greek city-state. This was, by our standards, an impaired form of equality; it did not include women and slaves, and in some of the earlier cities it did not include the poorer citizens either. In Rome under the Republic, there were Roman citizens and there were other subjects of Rome who did not qualify for that citizenship. Despite these important defects, equality was the founding principle, and this equality was always capable of extension. Cato the Elder won plaudits for extending the benefits of Roman citizenship to some of the 'lesser breeds'. In the same way, the equality of all human beings in the eyes of God was a crucial founding principle of Christianity. The fact that states which were converted to the new faith made little or no effort to alter their social arrangements to carry this principle into practice may be deplorable, but it is hardly surprising. The conversion of large parts of Europe was, after all, largely effected by queens and princesses who, after being converted themselves, persuaded their husbands, sons and fathers to convert the whole nation. This remarkable feature enabled Christian values to become the new intellectual and spiritual orthodoxy without denting the secular power of the king. All the same, the ideal of equality remained lodged in the mind as a prick to the conscience and, rather too occasionally, a spur to reform.

Very slowly over the centuries, certain egalitarian practices gained hold: the equality of all men before the law, then much later equal rights to political participation. In this country that process was not completed until 1930, when women under 30 were enfranchised – the 'flapper's vote'. Female suffrage was fiercely resisted, we must remember, not just by the unenlightened but by some of our finer minds, such as the great constitutionalist A.V. Dicey. The achievement of these legal and political equalities levelled up all adult citizens in their relations with the authorities and the political system, but economic and social equality remained a long way off. It is only quite recently that equality in all its aspects has reached its present status – of being the 'number one goal' in much social and political discussion, a value which cannot be left out of any argument and one which its enthusiastic supporters believe has the right to trump any other value.

Equality of outcome – the conflict with liberty and dynamism

But any such claim immediately runs into what I would call 'the Berlin Wall'. It is Sir Isaiah Berlin's lasting contribution to political philosophy to have pointed out that no single principle of social action, however irreproachable, can hope to enjoy unchallenged supremacy. Other principles, no less morally desirable, may come into conflict with it; and there is no reason to regard any one of the principles at stake as intrinsically superior to the other, or to expect that any such conflict can be easily resolved. Two principles may be stubbornly incommensurable; the best you can do is to work out a compromise between them, a trade-off, so that you obtain as much as you can of each, or as much as is desirable of each in the particular context. Equality often conflicts with liberty, for example. The government cannot engineer greater equality in economic relations without damaging the freedom of the more thrusting citizens to get ahead.

Like many on the Left before and since, in 1931 R.H. Tawney argued that this isn't necessarily so. In a well-structured society, he says:

... a large measure of equality, so far from being inimical to liberty, is essential to it. In conditions which impose co-operative, rather than merely individual effort, liberty is, in fact, equality in action, in the sense, not that all men perform identical functions or wield the same degree of power, but that all men are equally protected against the abuse of power, and equally entitled to insist that power shall be used, not for personal ends but for the general advantage.¹

Even within his last sentence quoted above, the strains of pressing this argument begin to show. 'Co-operative effort' is to be 'imposed'; 'all men' are 'entitled to insist' that power is used for 'general advantage'. This is clearly a society in which the state calls the shots. It is this line of argument, advanced in a dozen different forms down the ages, which provoked Berlin's famous retort in his footnote to his lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty*²:

... nothing is gained by a confusion of terms. To avoid glaring inequality or widespread misery I am ready to sacrifice some, or all, of my freedom: I may do so willingly and freely: but it is freedom that I am giving up for the sake of justice or equality or the love of my fellow men. I should be guilt-stricken, and rightly so, if I were not, in some circumstances, ready to make this sacrifice. But a sacrifice is not an increase in what is being sacrificed, namely freedom, however great the moral need or the compensation for it. Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or human happiness or a quiet conscience.

Just as principles may conflict, so may goals: the goal of income equality may, for example, conflict with the goal of a dynamic economy. Say we increase income taxes to a level at which all incomes after tax are approximately equal. Any rational person will then conclude that there is no point in striving to increase their income in this society. He or she will, therefore, either take life easy or emigrate, and the general level of prosperity, which is being shared out with such exquisite precision, is likely to decline – slowly at first but inexorably. It is also obvious that equality of opportunity may lead to inequality of result: if you let the greyhound off the leash at the same time as the dachshund, the result is unlikely to be a dead heat.

In moving on through the various types of inequality, I shall try to throw out suggestions which might help to remedy each type where it pinches the most rather than trying to offer a grand overall programme. But first we need to get our history straight. It is common ground, I think, that the equalities that are already achieved, or half-achieved, came from that deep urge to recognise the equality of all human beings as citizens and as children of God, to which I have already referred. We can see, for example, how the abolition of slavery and, in our own time, the fall of apartheid derived very largely from those impulses. And the same is true of the progress towards sexual equality: the movement arose first out of the wider pursuit of political equality and equality before the law, then, over the decades, extended into such areas as the workplace and social security. It started with the suffragettes and ended with equal pay and pensions.

Does the same consensus apply when we come to consider the history of such progress as we have made towards equality of incomes? The heroic narrative of the Labour Party and its allies is that the progressive forces in British politics won a gruelling struggle to equalise incomes through the tax system. The ideologists of inequality on the Right were routed, and as a result net post-tax incomes today, or at least until the last few years, while by no means equal are or were a great deal more equal than ever before.

This, I am afraid, is not quite how it happened. It is war, not socialism that was the great leveller. Income tax, you will recall, was first introduced on a serious basis to pay for the Napoleonic Wars. By 1916, after eight years in power, the Asquith government, the first great progressive government of modern times, had scarcely altered the standard rate of income tax. In 1905/06 it stood at 1/- in the pound. In 1914, even after Lloyd George's People's Budget of 1909, the rate was only 1/2d. But it was in that famous Budget that for the first time an extra tax, known as 'supertax', was levied on higher incomes largely to pay for re-arming the Navy with Dreadnoughts. The result was that from then on until the Nigel Lawson reforms of the late 1980s, the tax paid at higher levels was not only proportionate but progressive. After the declaration of war and the terrible expenditure of blood and money on the Western Front, things moved with great rapidity. By 1917, the income tax rate was 5/- in the pound. A bachelor who earned £10,000 a year now retained only £6,721 of his pay as opposed to £9,500 before the war. The figure drifted down to a low of 4/- in the pound between the wars, although supertax, now renamed 'surtax', continued to increase as the arms race picked up again. After the Second World War was declared, income tax took another giant jump, reaching 10/- in the pound in 1942. This left our £10,000-a-year bachelor with a modest £3,138 a year after income tax and surtax. That figure inched down very slowly after the Second World War. In 1969, the rate was still 8/3d, and it took another 25 years before it came down to the equivalent of 5 shillings in the pound, although by then shillings were only a faint memory.

In an Epilogue to *Equality*, published in 1952, Tawney rejoiced that 'a somewhat more equalitarian social order is in progress of emerging'. He felt that 'it is legitimate to feel a modest pride that a course in the right direction has been held by this country against the wind'³. But he did not really acknowledge that this direction had been imposed in the Second World War, as it had been in the First, by a national emergency rather than by an internal political imperative. Huge quantities of money had to be found to pay for the war, and it was right that those who could afford to pay should pay the most. It is not clear that income equalisation for its own sake had ever taken such a firm grip on British politics as its enthusiasts fondly imagined. Tax rates remained high after each war and came down so slowly only because high levels of public expenditure had become entrenched.

Equality of opportunity – the new ideal

For what had taken root was something which fits better into the category of equality of opportunity. Every citizen had a right to a decent start in life. There were to be 'homes for heroes' provided by the post-war council housing drive, the last enduring act of Lloyd George's coalition. And there were to be schools and hospitals fit for heroes and the children of heroes too.

All through the 1920s and 1930s, a succession of health and education acts were passed, mostly by Conservative or Conservative-dominated governments because Conservative governments happened to be in power for most of the time. Then, during the Second World War, the Churchill coalition produced blueprints for amalgamating the existing network of publicly provided schools and hospitals and pensions into nationally controlled and funded services – through the 1944 Butler Act, the Beveridge Report and the Willink Committee. I mention all this not to undermine the Attlee government's proud claim to have actually introduced these national services. But rather this is to point out how the two world wars had introduced a new consensus, a new ethic if you like, that the state had a duty to ensure for all its citizens both a decent minimum standard of living and a start in life which would enable them to make the best of their talents. One may argue about the levels of generosity with which these commitments were supported, at least to begin with. It is noticeable, for example, that the Labour government did not put up the rate of income tax when the National Health Service (NHS) and National Insurance (NI) schemes came in to operation in 1948, but did so only in its last year of office, and then it was to pay for the Korean War. Equality of opportunity, rather than equality of outcome, was clearly the guiding principle.

If you glance at the subsequent history of income equalisation, this impression is confirmed. Inequality of income continued to diminish as the share of national income taken by the government continued to rise. The government's share of national income surpassed 40 per cent in the late 1970s, then diminished during the Thatcher government years by about 5 per cent – 5 per cent which was then put back on again during the Major and Blair government years. But this recent revival in government expenditure has had little or no effect in equalising incomes. Indeed, the gap between the lowest and the highest has widened in the last few years. Whatever else may have been a priority for New Labour, income equalisation was not. Equality of opportunity has, though, been embraced by New Labour with the same fervour as it was embraced by R.A. Butler and the more go-ahead Tories during and after the Second World War.

In the early post-Second World War years, though, the two principles more or less appeared to elide. Since almost nobody had any cash – and the few who did had taken refuge in Jersey or the Bahamas – the inequalities of outcome were not so conspicuous and did not grate as much. The only characters to be denounced as parasites were the 'spivs' who broke the rules, and the tax exiles like Noël Coward who were denied honours because they were not sticking out the age of austerity with the rest of us. But, as the engine of prosperity picked up steam, gaps began to open between the front-runners and the pack. The 1960s was not only the decade of The Beatles and the end of the ban on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; it was also the decade of W.G. Runciman's invention of 'relative deprivation'. Amid the hum of dishwashers and the forest of TV aerials, it was no longer plausible to denounce the existence of grinding absolute poverty on a mass scale. But the growing prosperity gave the income gap a higher profile, allegedly made worse by being so visible in the advertisements on the new TV channel, ITV. Then and now I have always rather doubted the accusation (popularised by J.K. Galbraith in *The Affluent Society*) that advertising makes the deprived painfully conscious of the glamorous lives led by others and ignites unhealthy acquisitive instincts to buy stuff they don't need. One sometimes wonders whether these acerbic critics ever *watch* commercial TV, which features mostly adverts for rather humdrum necessities like insurance, beer and detergents, and soap operas about life towards the lower end of the ladder.

These puritanical arguments first heard in the 'never had it so good' years of the late 1950s and early 1960s, resurfaced in much the same form in the 'greed is good' era of the 1980s and after. Curious that Macmillan and Thatcher, such opposites in their social origins and attitudes, should labour under the same rough indictment. There is, of course, strong statistical evidence for the stretching out of incomes in recent years, both pre-tax and post-tax. More particularly, there is evidence of polarisation at both ends of the scales: the post-tax incomes of the top decile are further and further removed from the incomes of the bottom decile. The government does not seem much worried by this. John Hutton, the Business and Enterprise Secretary, said earlier this year:

Rather than questioning whether huge salaries are morally justified, we should elaborate the fact that people can be enormously successful in this country. Rather than placing a cap on that success, we should be questioning why it is not available to more people. Our overarching goal that no one should get left behind must not become translated into a stultifying sense that no one should be allowed to get ahead.⁴

Hutton oversimplifies the case for equality of opportunity, just as Tawney did for the equality-of-outcome thesis. For my own part, I do not intend to spend much time expressing shock and horror at the workings of the labour market. My anxiety is directed instead at the income tax system, which seems to me to have developed a sort of 'middle-aged spread'. The burden of taxation used to be carried relatively high on the body politic. Before the Second World War, nobody below the middle classes, broadly construed, paid any income tax at all. Now the paunch of the public purse has sagged. It is true, as defenders of the present structure point out, that in fact the rich pay more tax than they used to, because they actually pay the advertised rates instead of using every legitimate dodge to evade them. As a result, the top earners provide a higher proportion of Treasury revenue.

But it is also true, I think, that the poor pay too much tax these days and that the system needs 'hoicking up'. There is too much 'churning' of cash between government and taxpayer at the lower end of the scale. A single person with no children on £10,000 a year pays £1,415 in tax, then receives £1,138 in tax credit – a net outgo of just under £300. If he struggles up to £15,000, his tax rises to nearly £3,000 a year and his tax credit disappears. Thus he pays three-fifths of his extra income in tax, a marginal rate of 60 per cent. The remedy for fiscal sag is a simple one: to raise the personal allowances to a level much closer to average earnings and so float lower earners clear of income tax altogether. This of course helps higher earners too, indeed helps them more than the lower earners if the starting level for higher rate of tax is raised at the same time. I would recoup much of this by removing, or partially removing, the cap on NI contributions for those higher earners. Gordon Brown already made a sneaky start in this direction by introducing a 1 per cent contribution above the ceiling level. I think that is a reasonable direction to go. The NI system is a curious muddle, accumulated over the years from various half-hearted efforts to graft earnings-related elements onto the original flat-rate scheme. Why not admit, quite candidly, that this is a progressive tax on earnings for the special purpose of providing universal flat-rate benefits at a decent level for our fellow citizens in sickness and retirement? There would be no shame in that.

There is one other measure of financial equalisation which would merely restore us to the way things were 30 years ago. The council tax was a reasonable compromise solution. It rescued us from the calamity of the poll tax which had destroyed local revenue and local autonomy for a generation. I persist in thinking that the council tax isn't a bad tax at all; like the old domestic rates, it's highly visible, easy to collect and hard to evade. But unlike the old rates, it is not fully progressive and is all the more unpopular for that reason, because a house in 'Millionaires Row' pays the same as a decent semi in a nice area. Introduce a few more bands at the top end and the demand on the lower end will be that much less.

These two changes could produce a considerable amount of revenue to help the worst-off without unduly compressing incentives. I must add that imposing a somewhat stiffer property tax on owners of the more sumptuous residences seems to me a much fairer way of taxing non-domiciled people (non-doms) than the absurd tax proposed by Mr Darling, only equalled in its idiocy by the alteration in capital gains tax. Nigel Lawson's top levels of 40 per cent for taxes on income, capital gains and inheritance alike had lasted 20 years, for the very good reason that they stopped energetic people from wasting their time trying to switch assets from one category to another. As for property taxes already being too high, I cannot resist recording my own experience. We have lived in the same house for 40 years. And our council tax is still a few pounds lower than our rates were in the mid-1960s when the Loony Left reigned in Islington – that's in cash terms, not real terms. Obviously that level was outrageously high then, but I cannot seriously pretend that it is outrageously high now. At the same time, I don't pretend that these measures – or even other measures that might be considerably more far-reaching – would eliminate envy and resentment. This resentment is in any case focused on wealthy people who are held not to have earned it: on hedge-funders and minor members of the Royal family, not on footballers and pop stars, nor even on glitzy tycoons like Sir Richard Branson and Sir Philip Green.

Inequality of income is clearly not the major motor of the present discontents. It irritates the wound but it does not cause it, for the simple reason that the inequalities were just as large, if not more so, in other recent periods such as the 1930s, when it seems that resentment about inequality was not so sharply felt.

Instead, the government is focusing on equality of opportunity and especially on its subset, equality of access. Everyone must have access to art and music, to sport and the countryside, to technical and professional skills, to home ownership and capital accumulation, to name but a few things. The difficulty, of course, is that in most of these cases the government is not in a position to wave a magic wand and, say, create a network of music teachers and music academies so that every child has the opportunity to learn a serious musical instrument to high standards. Most such opportunities will depend on flourishing intermediate institutions which either provide the opportunities themselves or underwrite them. The trouble is that the Tory and Labour governments alike over the past 30 years have serially undermined the financial and legal independence and destroyed the self-confidence of almost every intermediate institution in the land – local authorities, professional associations, schools and universities. It is only by reviving the freedoms of self-management which these institutions had previously enjoyed since the day they were created that genuine access in the Reithian sense – that is, access to the best – can be made available.

There are other kinds of access which are not so often mentioned, sometimes because they conflict with current orthodoxies. Let me give an example which some people have considered eccentric, but which seems to me quite significant. In other European countries, from Ireland to Italy, it is easy enough for people of modest means to buy a patch of land and build a house or chalet for themselves, gradually completing the job over a period, perhaps at weekends and in the evenings, as funds and time become available. In such countries you will often see a half-finished building or a pile of bricks by the side of the road, representing work in progress. In Britain, by contrast, such a sight is a rarity, as is the possibility of a poorer person getting hold of a patch of land for a modest sum. The ownership of building land is largely confined to public authorities and big developers. Indeed, the planning system frowns on piecemeal development and restricts the supply of land to the bare minimum, thus sending the price shooting sky-high. In country districts, this, rather than the growth of second homes, is what puts the price of a house out of reach of locals. In South Pembrokeshire, for example, the price of a building plot is £80,000, or more than £100,000 if it has a sea view, although this is a poor area with only a sprinkling of holiday homes (admittedly including mine). Access to the land is denied not by landowners, who would happily sell off bits of any agriculturally low-grade hillside or wasteland, but by the planning system. In this case, as in many other cases where access is concerned, government is the problem rather than the solution.

It is obviously highly desirable that we strive towards equality of access. Yet if we are to be honest with ourselves, we cannot really claim that access is denied exactly in many of the cases we have been thinking about. The museums are free, schools will arrange specialist teachers, the footpaths are open, Radio 3 is on air every day, sports clubs are eager for recruits and the number of university places has doubled. In the final analysis, I cannot pretend that inequality of access is any more crucial than inequality of income to the malaise we sense but find hard to pin down. They exacerbate it, but are they the driving cause?

Equality of treatment

Equality in access to public services such as health, education, housing and social security sounds a straightforward enough goal. Yet in carrying out the social engineering required to move us in the desired direction, government is compelled to discriminate, to treat citizens unequally. This inequality of treatment may be benignly intended and to some extent unavoidable, but it almost inevitably sets up consequential inequalities of respect and agency. If some people are seen to be in control of all the important decisions in their lives and others have most of these decisions taken for them, even for the best of motives such as equality of result and by the most enlightened administrators, you cannot expect the high-powered to have much respect for the low-powered, or for the low-powered to have much respect for themselves. The 'uppers' will find it hard not to look down on the 'downers'. This is a fact of modern life which the Left has belatedly come to have a glimmering of; 'enablement' and 'empowerment' are now seen as part of a new definition of 'welfare'. Yet even in assisting people to assist themselves, the controlling itch is hard to resist; there is more than a whiff of make-believe in the offers of consultation and partnership, and one which those on the receiving end are not slow to detect.

How are we to give the condemned and excluded a real stake in society, a genuine sense both of participation and self-worth? Is not equality of treatment often easier and more effective than carefully targeted benefits? Would it not be better to have flat-rate systems of child benefit and retirement pensions, at generous levels, and get rid of the means-tested network of credits and benefits which are so uneven, awkward and humiliating in their application? 'Down with the means test' was a great slogan in the 1930s. It still has its resonance. Equality of treatment must be an underlying principle too in our efforts to break down the mono-tenured ghettos of our larger council estates. I say break down, but not knock down; many of them are decent, even handsome places. But over the last 20 years, as they have dwindled in numbers, so they have concentrated the most depressed sectors of society: the workless, the incapacitated and the 'monoglot' immigrants. 'Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here' could just as well be written over the gates of the worst estates as over the gates of hell. I do not want to prejudge how best to break down the ghettos. Every variation of right-to-buy, shared ownership, social landlord and co-operative solution is worth looking at. But the people who should do the looking are local councillors, not ministers in Whitehall whose endless regulations further intensify the sense of remoteness and powerlessness.

Equality of treatment bleeds into equality of responsibility. They are – or ought to be – part of the same transaction between the citizen and the state, or between the citizen and their home town. In receiving benefits, people should think of themselves and be thought of as also taking on responsibilities. Benefits which are tossed out without such reciprocal expectations are a deprivation of participation and a denial of agency. An extreme example is the system whereby housing benefit has been paid direct by the government to landlords without passing through the tenant, for fear that the tenant will 'blow' the rent money on drink and drugs. Now, quite rightly, an experiment of giving the money to the tenant is being held in several local authorities, and landlords are up in arms. Well, tough luck. If we act as though tenants, whether council or private, cannot be entrusted with even that much responsibility, we really are treating them as infants. The same is true of out-of-work benefits, notably incapacity benefit, where the numbers of those drawing it for reasons of mental distress have ballooned. Casually handing out the cash without making any serious collaborative effort to find work for the recipients is not only an insult to those who slog away for wages not much higher than the benefit. It is also to condemn the unemployed as effectively unemployable, incapable of living as agents rather than patients.

This naturally leads me on to mention other areas where equality of agency may be restored or bolstered. Some variety of school voucher or 'ticket', as W.E. Forster called it in a section of the 1870 Education Act that never came into force, would give the less well-off parent a locus in the educational process which the present system of limited choice of school does not offer.

These are familiar topics among libertarians. They are even gaining ground among social democrats, now that such impeccably social-democratic nations as Sweden and the Netherlands have demonstrated that it is to the worst off that these devices offer the best chance of both voice and exit.

Equality of membership

I want to spend my last few paragraphs not on these increasingly fashionable possibilities – admirable though they are – but rather on exploring three areas of social life. These areas are not usually thought of as having anything to do with equality at all, yet in my view they provide the surest underpinning for the more familiar types of equality.

What these three areas have in common is that they came for a while to be regarded as old-fashioned and irrelevant to society today. Certainly they are not often mentioned anywhere near the debate about equality and inequality. All these topics have, rather surprisingly, come back into play in the last couple of years. I think even those, from the Prime Minister downwards, who have begun to deploy these topics are at heart a little bit mystified about what they are playing at. I will refer to the subjects in the guises in which they are currently presented.

They are, first the overt encouragement of 'Britishness'; second, the revival of faith schools; third, the restoration of financial incentives for marriage. A few years ago, none of these would have been regarded as a suitable topic for polite society; they were all, to use the word Ken Clarke applied to the tax allowance for married couples, 'an anomaly'. They were unsuitable elements in an individualistic, secular, modern-minded society in which the 'cake' of custom had crumbled into dust. And even now that they are considered suitable for revival, the justifications given for them are somewhat hesitant, as though the justifiers were trying to make out an argument in a foreign language they had not spoken for years. Re-stressing the importance of being British will, it is said, cement the allegiance of new immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants. The revival of faith schools will improve the general level of exam results. And if more people are encouraged to get married, levels of delinquency and social misery will be reduced.

Now all these things may be true. In fact, they probably are. But these are only instrumental by-products. There is a much more sweeping and enveloping effect on those who commit themselves to such reinvigorated social institutions. What happens is that they are admitted, on equal terms, to membership of a community. The oath of allegiance to the Queen which, it is suggested, schoolchildren should now take is not a humiliating crawl, as republicans think. On the contrary, as members of the armed forces and other public officials readily assume, it is an admission into a community in which all are equally members and equally bound by lasting ties of loyalty. Many secularists are indignant that some parents should feign or exaggerate religious commitment in order to get their children into a popular school. But from the point of view of society, the exact degree of warmth of a parent's religious convictions is his own business; what matters is that this parent and his or her family have associated themselves with a particular form of community; they have enlisted in one of Burke's 'little platoons'. In the case of marriage, the couple are forming their own 'little platoon' which, as soon as it is formed, enjoys equal status with every other such couple-dom. As D.H. Lawrence put it, "It is marriage, perhaps, which had given man the best of his freedom, given him his little kingdom of his own within the kingdom of the state" – a kingdom which is no less great for a poor family than for the family of the billionaire or the royal family, and may indeed function rather better. Just as all of us are equally subjects of the Queen (or in a republic, all equally citizens) and all members of a faith are equal in that membership, so every family is equal in value. Indeed there is no more obvious way for a prince or politician to remind the rest of us that he is no better than we are than by parading his family. That is how he can best remind us that he shares our common humanity.

Discussion of equality tends to take place in terms of the advantages and disadvantages enjoyed or endured by people as individuals. Yet the most precious forms of equality may be those in which the individual is not atomised but freely conjoined. And where the individual exhibits psychic damage and distress, it may be precisely because he is not in any body beyond his own. He enjoys none of the equalities of association but stands unprotected against the realisations of his own frailty and failure.

Conclusion

I am perfectly ready to point out 'fiscal sag' and the unfair weight it throws upon the least well off. I am eager to point out how important it is to restore agency and responsibility wherever possible to those who are presently being 'babied' through life. We must make it possible for everyone to lead a life which they can consider worth living and which can give them a legitimate sense of self-worth. But I doubt whether the most robust measures taken against the more material inequalities of income and opportunity will do much to cheer up the desolation among the 'downers' in our society, unless we recognise the importance of the last and least mentioned types of equality: the equality of membership.

Neither Left nor Right has ever really got hold of this principle: the Right because it tends to give priority to subjection to authority over shared belonging; the Left because it is often suspicious of existing local and national institutions and would prefer to replace them by an international working class. The greatest fiasco in the history of the Left was the failure of the working class to join hands across national borders and refuse to fight each other in 1914. Both ideological wings essentially fail to grasp that inequality is a complex evil. To remedy it, one must engage in various separate enterprises: to work for distributive justice, that is, a tax system in which the burdens are fairly shared. It is possible to argue that if the 'ancien' fiscal regime had been remotely fair, there might never have been a French Revolution. But there are other sorts of fairness which must be addressed: equality of opportunity, bringing about a society which equalises life chances so far as possible and opens up every career to talent from every social level; equality of responsibility, with a welfare state which is not blatantly divided into agents and patients, the doers and the done-to; and finally equality of membership. The last of these is by no means the least, for, as St Paul told the citizens of Ephesus, "we are members one of another" – and that too was a message about equality.

About the author

Ferdinand Mount is the author of *Mind the Gap*, and was formerly head of the Number Ten Policy Unit and editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Footnotes

1. R.H. Tawney (1931), *Equality*. 4th edn (1964), p.168
2. Isaiah Berlin (1958) *Two Concepts of Liberty*, p.10
3. R.H. Tawney (1952), *Epilogue to Equality*, p.222
4. John Hutton, *The Guardian*, 10 March 2008

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