

When the social divide deepens

Who would have thought, ten years ago, that the current Prime Minister would have been so keen for Ken Livingstone to become London mayor again? Who would have thought that the greatest improvements in living standards would have been realised in the areas that voted for a Conservative MP in 1997? That the largest increases in life expectancy have been in the areas which returned the shadow cabinet, while life expectancies have increased most slowly in Cabinet ministers' constituencies? All since that landslide election for a progressive party that promised equality.

Who would have thought that the chances of children getting to participate in higher education would have increased most under Labour for those whose parents voted Conservative? Areas most loyal to the Labour party have felt the brunt of social polarisation. The rich are harmed too but, for them, the effects are less obvious. They live shorter lives compared with the affluent of other (more equal) OECD nations; they live in fear of others so have less freedom to choose where to live. They increasingly feel they need to opt out of state education and health provision and they don't feel rich since almost always above them those slightly richer are gaining more.

Who would have thought ten years ago that the very richest of the world would flock to live in the capital; and that wider London and its financial heart should attract the greatest sustained net in-flow of migrants seen since the 1840s famine in Ireland? Do you remember the poster that asked for the last person to leave Britain to turn out the light should Labour win an election victory? That was a very different Labour party from the one that has presided over such a huge transfer of wealth to the already rich.

"Isn't it ironic" is an old refrain in politics, of the kind: Wasn't it funny that Margaret Thatcher signed more schools over to being comprehensives compared to any other Education Secretary despite her believing in them the least? I think this might be the only thing she did that I personally benefited from. So it's not that ironic. Neither is it ironic that one of the first governments to attempt to transfer wealth to the poor directly – through child trust funds – will see those attempts wiped into insignificance by the acceleration of market trends in the opposite direction.

And what are they thinking inside that Labour movement of all this? A large part of the point of not being that radical was to be electable. The failure over inequality at home has been overshadowed in the failure stakes by that huge misery of a war abroad.

What should the party have done and what should it do now if it really wants to benefit the poor in the ways of previous Labour and Liberal administrations (all of whom presided over narrowing social gaps)? It is perhaps time to say that we now have the evidence that "first past the post" Westminster voting system has not made the country a better place. Proportional representation would make so many more peoples' votes matter, especially those who Labour can currently take for granted in safe seats.

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Short term, there could be another cabinet reshuffle. As for another leader, it's hardly an ideal time. There is no Barack Obama in the waiting room of British politics about to offer us, at least, a dream of a different world. It has been a hard lesson to learn that a succession of Labour victories in economic good times is no guarantee of greater social equality, not in the way that just one Labour victory in the worst of times was in the past. The fastest route to greater equality is not a comfortable route – it is a banking crisis, slow financial collapse and prolonged recession – which tends to bring those at the top of the social scale slightly closer to those at the bottom. Funnily enough it happened once before, some 80 years ago when a bunch of old-etonians were in power.

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