



IN PURSUIT OF EGALITARIANISM

and why social mobility
cannot get us there

Rebecca Hickman

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THE DEMOCRATIC LEFT

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Social mobility and egalitarianism, we are told, are both children of the same mother – fairness. However, this pamphlet argues that although they may share a parent, one was fathered by self-interest, the other by social solidarity, and therefore the kinds of society they produce face in starkly different directions.

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Executive summary

Inequality curtails freedom. To be sufficiently free we must be sufficiently equal, but too many people simply do not have the resources to make free choices, realise their full potential and make up for the brute bad luck of birth – the condition of their body and mind, and the economic circumstances of their parents. Society therefore has a moral duty to intervene through measures that bring about sufficient equality to ensure that everyone's freedom is maximised.

Within the Labour Party there have always been rich strands of debate on what the party should stand for. Over its existence the debate has served to renew the party, hold it to account and re-invigorate the application of its founding principles. But now Labour is struggling – preoccupied with narrow calculations of political advantage, stripped of its own language and wedded to an outdated concept of social mobility, it has lost its way. If Labour is to survive as a force for social justice based on the animating principle of egalitarianism it must look deeper, learn from its history, build coalitions and, above all, develop a new narrative and policy agenda around the concept of equality of freedom.

When New Labour came to power it made clear its determination to eliminate child poverty and more broadly to build a fairer society, and its successes should not be dismissed in terms of both innovative policies (such as the New Deal) and positive outcomes (falling poverty rates). But despite these successes, the landmark victory of 1997 now seems like an opportunity missed. With an unprecedented public mandate and the political space this created, much more could have been achieved.

Instead it seems that New Labour squandered its political capital. By various measures progress has been disappointing, and in some cases non-existent. The Gini coefficient is an internationally used measure of income equality, which under the Conservatives rose from a value of 0.25 in 1979 to 0.33 in 1997. But under New Labour it

has kept climbing, reaching a new high of 0.36 in 2007/08, and placing the UK amongst the most unequal of western nations. In terms of poverty rates, in the early years New Labour did make good progress in reducing overall and child poverty, but worryingly the positive trends have started to go into reverse. The most recent figures – for 2007/08 – show that this was the third year in a row that overall poverty rates increased, and that since 2004/05 the total number of people living in poverty has risen by one million, bringing the total to 11 million and almost undoing the progress made in New Labour's first two terms.

“Meritocracy fails to create a more just society because at best it is about removing obstacles from the paths of those who have the energy and luck to be able to make the most of their talents, and at worst it is about social Darwinism, the survival of the fittest and the demise of the rest”

In their second term, New Labour cast around for a fresh narrative and readily co-opted the notion of social mobility as the measure and goal of a fair society, generating a certain amount of dismay among those who maintain that as social mobility is about meritocracy, it offers the narrowest possible definition of fairness. Meritocracy fails to create a more just society because at best it is about removing obstacles from the paths of those who have the energy and luck to be able to make the most of their talents, and at worst it is about social Darwinism, the survival of the fittest and the demise of the rest.

Social justice must be about more than simply clearing the way for those who are able and tenacious. It is above all about how we look after those who may have less to contribute, who encounter bad luck or who simply make mistakes – factors that public policy can seek to mitigate but will never eliminate.

In a meritocracy the strategies and resources, self-belief and social capital available to the better-off mean that the social ladder will never operate justly. What is more, even if the ladder

could be made to ‘work’ properly, it fails to provide us with the right moral template for our social and economic relationships.

- First, meritocracy undermines equal worth. Talk of the inherent worth of each and every human being is meaningless if we simultaneously accept a society in which ostentatious wealth exists cheek-by-jowl with unrelenting need, and in which the poor are taught to be grateful for the crumbs from the table of their better-off neighbours.
- Second, meritocracy requires and legitimises a level of inequality that harms us all. It is often said that so long as living standards are rising for everyone, the gap between rich and poor should not matter. But it does. It matters for both moral and practical reasons. It is not only the poorest who suffer as a result of inequality. The most unequal countries show worse social outcomes for people at every level of society compared with those on a comparable income in more equal societies.

“Inequality works against positive freedoms by creating a hierarchical and stratified society that encourages competition and individualism”

- Third, through its emphasis on individual advancement and by requiring people to be in a permanent state of competition with each other, meritocracy damages community. It is not difficult to see the corrosive effect that the ascent of self-interest has had on our social fabric. There is a crisis of hope in our homes and communities which emerged during the 1980s, an age of individualism when we began to lose belief in our capacity for goodness and generosity, to act in each other’s best interests not just our own. Over time, this has resulted in social dislocation, loss of trust, an erosion in our commitment to civic values, and the disintegration of traditional bonds of family and community.
- Fourth, the meritocratic principle promotes a hegemony of middle-class values. The

ladder is linear – there is one way up, one way down and one destination, the achievement of employment success, money and associated social status. However, human talent and human experience is rich and diverse; it takes us in many directions, with contrasting criteria of success.

- Fifth, meritocracy is not concerned with happiness, but our economic and social policies must be. If the rungs of the ladder were clearly correlated to increases in personal happiness and wellbeing, social mobility would be more defensible, but it has been shown by Richard Layard and others that beyond a certain level of subsistence income, greater wealth does not equate to greater happiness.

This pamphlet argues that freedom is an alternative lens through which to consider equality. We are familiar with the two sides of the freedom coin – freedom from and freedom to. We all wish to be free from crime and insecurity, from ill-health and destitution, from discrimination and ill-treatment, and these days consider such things our right. But a more complete understanding of freedom encompasses the fullness of human aspirations, diversity and potential – freedom to make our own choices and follow our own path.

This broad and optimistic conception of freedom suggests that far from equality being antithetical to freedom, it is in fact a requirement of freedom. Partly because my freedom requires your freedom, but primarily because inequality works against positive freedoms by creating a hierarchical and stratified society that encourages competition and individualism, and that prejudices life chances, stifles diversity, and undermines healthy human relationships.

Equality of freedom impels us to think not only about why some freedoms are beyond the reach of so many from the day they come into this world when for others they are received as a birthright, but also about why a sense of freedom eludes many on higher incomes despite material security. Above all, it points to the good society we all seek and provides a distinct, far-reaching and hope-filled expression of Labour’s core values – equality, solidarity, democracy and inclusion.

Twelve policy proposals for a fairer society

- 1 Entitle all new parents to at least eighteen months paid transferable parental leave, with a ring-fenced element of three months for fathers.
- 2 Allocate significant additional resourcing for the roll-out of Sure Start children's centres, in order to increase their capacity to identify and take services to families most in need.
- 3 Ensure that overall benefit levels for children of low-income families, in and out of work, increase faster than average earnings.
- 4 Abandon the fiction of parental choice and create a system founded on the principle of pupil entitlement, using banding based on the ability range in an area.
- 5 Standardise school status, including the abolition of all remaining grammar schools, halting the academies programme and private sector involvement in running schools, and outlawing special admissions policies for faith schools.
- 6 End charitable status for private schools, and redirect the £100 million saving into the state sector.
- 7 Abolish university tuition fees and introduce a graduate solidarity tax.
- 8 Introduce a living wage, a minimum wage based on an analysis of the actual income required for an adequate standard of living, bringing more people out of poverty, reducing dependence on in-work benefits and helping to ensure that work always pays.
- 9 Lower the level at which the new 50 per cent tax rate kicks in, from £150,000 to £100,000, and introduce a minimum rate of tax for all those earning above this amount to ensure they do not benefit disproportionately from tax reliefs and allowances.
- 10 Crack down on tax avoidance and tax evasion, including abolishing the domicile rule and leading international efforts to eradicate tax havens.
- 11 Tighten the definition of what can be treated as 'capital gain' in business and financial transactions, ensuring that take-home windfalls on big deals are subject to income tax not capital gains tax rates (50 per cent, rather than 18 per cent).
- 12 Shift the burden of inheritance tax so that it falls on the beneficiaries of bequests (under capital gains tax rules) rather than on the estate, thereby increasing incentives to disperse wealth.

In Pursuit of Egalitarianism

Introduction

It was once thought a self-evident truth that all people are created equal, but as the twenty-first century advances it is no longer clear what this really means or, more importantly, what we in Britain want it to mean.

If we believe every person has equal worth, we seem surprisingly comfortable with the crushing social and economic inequalities that still determine life chances in our country. In an age of prosperity it has been convenient to underplay the suffering experienced by many and overplay the opportunities available to some. But as we move into an era of austerity it is becoming ever more urgent to provide an accurate description of the society we live in and a compelling narrative of the society we seek. As such, opportunity is emerging from economic disaster – the opportunity to bring about a new social settlement in favour of egalitarianism, as the truest expression and proper goal of the good society.

The political spotlight is once again on the question of whether or not egalitarianism is the right goal for Labour and social mobility the right policy vehicle to get us there. Two recent publications have intensified the debate. In June, new research by the Fabian Society on people's attitudes to economic inequality was published. Shortly after, cabinet member John Denham MP delivered a speech on the findings, which drew fire from a number of left-wing commentators. Questioning the usefulness of egalitarianism as a guiding principle for Labour, Denham argued that in order to build a successful electoral coalition, the left must be better attuned to public scepticism about economic equality.

In July, the government-appointed Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, chaired by Alan Milburn MP, published its final report putting forward a series of recommendations all bent towards the goal of a 'meritocracy where individuals are able to advance on the basis of their talent and effort'.¹ Side-stepping the more complex questions of how talent is defined and rewarded,

and how the ingredients of effort relate to social position, Milburn and his fellow panel members propounded a model of social fairness built entirely around the principle of social mobility – or ensuring that the able can succeed.

This pamphlet will engage both strands of the ongoing debate. It will scrutinise the logic and effects of social mobility and argue that as another expression of the meritocratic rule, social mobility sets us on course for a divided and dysfunctional society. It will make the case instead for reviving and renewing the principle of egalitarianism as the route to a strong and cohesive society in which everyone can prosper, both individually and collectively.

Equality of freedom will be proposed as a rallying point for all social democrats. The freedom talked about in this context goes beyond traditional notions of liberty and embraces all aspects of the material and emotional wellbeing of the individual. In other words, it is about the freedom to flourish, to be unique, and to be happy, as well as the freedom to use all your talents to achieve your potential. Among other things, this notion of equality of freedom helps to illuminate the importance of diversity in equality, of individual paths alongside shared responsibility, and, significantly, to make clear that equality is about raising not lowering the common denominators.

The twelve policy recommendations at the end of the pamphlet are informed by the belief that the justness and success of our society is not the sole responsibility of governments and welfare institutions, but a common burden, the concern of each and every one of us. The crucial challenge is how to revive a sense of collective endeavour and shared responsibility, and harness it for the benefit of everyone.

What is a fair society?

'Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.'

Robert Kennedy

All three of our main political parties talk about creating a fairer society. But fairness is an elastic

concept, capable of being enlisted for diverse agendas. As Roy Hattersley recently commented, ‘We all believe in fairness and define it according to taste.’² The fault line between those who interpret fairness in terms of opportunities and those who say it must also be about outcomes separates the competing approaches to the future direction of British public policy-making. The first school has dominated political debate since the break with the post-war consensus at the end of the 1970s.

More recently, equality of opportunity has been erected as the mast and main sail on New Labour’s ship of social justice. Less attention has been paid to the direction of this ship than to the fact that it moves. So while inequality has grown, New Labour has maintained that in actual fact a fairer society is being fashioned. And in the meantime, public spending to deal with the fall-out of huge disparities in wealth and opportunity has continued to rise, while the causes of inequality have remained unaddressed.

In their second term, casting around for a fresh narrative, New Labour co-opted the notion of social mobility. This fitted well with the existing emphasis on maximising the potential of each, and has continued to be pursued through initiatives such as Sure Start and the expansion of post-compulsory education. But assessed on its own merits, it is increasingly evident that social mobility is not only a defective policy tool, but also an insufficient policy goal for the left.

Why? Because social mobility is about meritocracy and therefore provides us with the narrowest possible definition of fairness. Meritocracy had its heyday under Thatcher, when we were told there was no such thing as society and as individuals we should pursue our own self-interest and trust that the deserving would succeed. In actual fact, patterns of disadvantage – in income and power, education and health, employment and housing – continued to be reproduced from generation to generation. Meritocracy fails to create a more just society because at best it is about removing the obstacles from the paths of those who have the energy and luck to be able to make the most of their talents, and at worst, it is about social Darwinism, the survival of the fittest and the demise of the rest. As the former, it provides a limiting vision of our society-to-be. As the latter, it subverts social egalitarianism and

solidarity in a way that should be explicitly repudiated by the left.

Unprecedented inequality

‘Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes some virtues impracticable, and others extremely difficult.’

Samuel Johnson

Hopes of reversing or even stemming the rise in inequality witnessed in the 1980s have been dealt a hefty blow in recent years. While the worse off have gained from many Labour policies, including the minimum wage, new tax credits and better support into work – policies that were generally introduced in the early years and with an accompanying narrative that emphasised economic efficiency and personal responsibility, rather than social justice – inequality in Britain has reached a new peak.

“Under New Labour the growth in the personal income of the top 1 per cent ... has been eye-watering and outstripped that of any other group”

The incomes of the very richest have increased faster than those of any other group, while those at the bottom of the spectrum have declined in relative terms.³ Between 1945 and 1979 the top 10 per cent of the population’s share of total personal income shrank. But since then, first under Thatcher and then under Blair, they have recovered their position, in fact recovered it to levels last seen in the late 1940s.⁴ What is more, under New Labour the growth in the personal income of the top 1 per cent (about half a million people) has been eye-watering and outstripped that of any other group. In 2004/05, this group enjoyed average incomes before tax of over £150,000 a year, six times the average for all taxpayers of about £25,000 per year.⁵ At the same time, middle-income groups have experienced comparatively weak earnings growth, leading to an understandable sense of frustration and

² Hattersley 2009

³ Brewer et al 2008, p 4

⁴ Ibid, p 28

⁵ Ibid, p 11

injustice as they watch the highest incomes race away.

The Gini coefficient is an internationally used measure of income equality, with a range of 0 (total equality) to 1 (a single individual controlling the entire income in the economy). In the UK, the Gini rose from a value of 0.25 in 1979 to a peak of around 0.34 in the early 1990s, an increase of over one-third. Researchers at the Institute for Fiscal Studies have observed: ‘The scale of this rise in inequality has been shown to be unparalleled both historically and compared with the changes taking place at the same time in most other developed countries.’⁶ When Labour came to power in 1997 the Gini coefficient was at 0.33. In 2007/08 it reached a new high of 0.36.

“The poorest fifth actually saw their incomes decline year on year from 2005 to 2008 by an average annual rate of nearly 1 per cent, compared with an average annual growth of over 1 per cent for the richest fifth”

Some argue that inequality should not matter, so long as average living standards are rising and poverty decreasing. By these measures, the Labour government made some significant advances in its first two terms but more recently progress has slowed and in some cases has even gone into reverse. The most recent figures, for 2007/08, show 2.9 million children living in poverty (using a poverty line of 60 per cent of median income, before housing costs) – a rise of 200,000 children over the previous three years, reversing about one-quarter of the decline in child poverty rates between 1996/97 and 2004/05.⁷ This was also the third year in a row that overall poverty rates increased. Since 2004/05 the total number of people living in poverty has risen by one million (before housing costs), bringing the total to 11 million and almost undoing the progress made in Labour’s first two terms.⁸ Using a stricter definition of poverty (40 per cent of median income, before housing costs) that focuses attention on the most disadvantaged, the proportion of people living in poverty has actually increased since 1997 by nearly 2 per cent, to 3.6 million.

It is also worth noting that while real income growth (an indicator of living standards) has risen by an annual average of 1.1 per cent so far in Labour’s third term, this disguises different rates of change across the income spectrum. The poorest fifth actually saw their incomes decline year on year from 2005 to 2008 by an average annual rate of nearly 1 per cent, compared with an average annual growth of over 1 per cent for the richest fifth.⁹ So rising average living standards do not engage the question of relative fairness.

Different sections of society also have different experiences. One group that seems to be particularly easy to ignore and who have suffered disproportionately bad outcomes over recent years are working-age adults without children. They have been neglected by the Government’s tax and benefits reforms, and are now at greater risk of falling into poverty than they were when Labour came to power – 14 per cent against 12 per cent in 1996/97, and the highest rate for decades.¹⁰ Most recently, the abolition of the 10p starting rate of income tax has hit this group particularly hard.

New Labour has made clear its determination to eliminate child poverty and more broadly to build a fairer society, and its successes should not be dismissed, both in terms of innovative policies (such as the New Deal) and positive outcomes (falling poverty rates). Nonetheless, the limitations of their approach is reflected in the fact that the most deprived have benefited least from the range of reforms since 1997, and have actually become relatively worse off, while those on middle incomes feel increasingly neglected.

The Government’s strategy – New Opportunities

‘The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measure of national income.’

Simon Kuznets (economist who devised GDP)

In January 2009 the Government published the white paper *New Opportunities*, setting out its agenda ‘for building fair chances for everyone to succeed in the new economy’.¹¹ The white paper sketches out what has already been achieved under this Government, the remaining challenges and an action plan for the future. It is essentially

⁶ Brewer et al 2009, p 23

⁷ Ibid, p 30

⁸ Ibid, p 36

⁹ Ibid, p 18

¹⁰ Ibid, pp 36 and 48

¹¹ Cabinet Office press notice, 13 January 2009

about life chances – what shapes them, what advances them, what injures them. There is much to welcome, in particular, the continuing emphasis on investment in the early years and the provision of more support, financial and practical, for families that need it most.

At the same time, the Government tasked a new Panel on Fair Access to the Professions with making recommendations on how government and professions can work together to remove the obstacles and deterrents that result in under-representation of lower social groups in high status careers. The final report, *Unleashing Aspiration*, was published in July and includes a raft of proposals concerning every stage of the route to work, from the early years and school, to university, internships and recruitment.

But the approach and therefore success of *New Opportunities* and *Unleashing Aspiration* are limited by their premise – that social mobility is the route to a fairer society. While we are told that ‘talent and hard work should determine your success in life’¹² and ‘social mobility should explicitly be the top overarching social policy priority for this and future governments,’¹³ no meaningful attempt is made to explain why this is the case and why this will produce a better society for us all, not just the winners. The aridity of the documents stems largely from an analysis that neglects to engage with elemental questions relating to inclusion, mutuality and, perhaps most importantly, distributional justice. This failure to provide a compelling overreaching narrative of the society it envisions reflects New Labour’s wider current predicament – its self-destructive insistence on surrendering its own language and values to narrow calculations of political advantage.

Philosophising on the meaning of the good society was perhaps beyond the remit of these documents, but by presenting social mobility as both an end in itself and a means to an end, the Government has invited us to consider the merits and constraints of social mobility as the guiding principle for an array of policy interventions. More significantly, the documents again make clear that social mobility is meritocracy ill-disguised, begging questions of the left (which they could be forgiven for thinking had already been answered) about the place for such concepts in their political credo.

Social mobility – an incoherent and limiting focus

‘The good society cannot be built by levelling the playing field for acquisitiveness and selfishness. Greater material equality must be the foundation of a moral community built around the principles of fellowship and equality of respect.’

Jon Cruddas MP

So what can be said of social mobility? Certainly that it is an interesting field of academic study and a useful tool for charting the evolution of societies over lengthy periods. Also, that there seems to be little agreement about what it is or how to measure it, keeping many sociologists and economists busy in debating definitional and evidential problems.

There are two types of social mobility, both concerned with equality of opportunity: absolute social mobility (the creation of more opportunities to rise to the top of the socio-economic hierarchy) and relative social mobility (movement up and down the hierarchy). The white paper addresses both: ‘This Government has two aims for the future: each successive generation to gain better jobs; and everyone having the opportunity to realise their potential and having [a] fair chance to access these better jobs.’¹⁴

Ostensibly, who would disagree? It is axiomatic that every person should be able to fulfil their talents, to be the best they can be. It may be challenging but it is hardly controversial, and certainly does not create a dividing line between ethical socialism and other political philosophies.

But on closer study of social mobility as a public policy goal, three unavoidable problems emerge. First, relative social mobility is symmetrical.¹⁵ In other words, high social fluidity means that the link between someone’s background and final destination is weakened on all parts of the social spectrum, and while some find themselves better off, others find themselves worse off. Upward mobility indicates equivalent downward mobility. New Labour has not made clear what it thinks about this or whether a high social mobility rate that comprises significant downward mobility is a necessary by-product of the overall strategy,

¹² Cabinet Office January 2009, p 61

¹³ Cabinet Office July 2009, p 20

¹⁴ *Ibid* p 17

¹⁵ Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007

providing the vital incentives needed to spur people on to better themselves or to protect their social position.

It is easier therefore for the white paper to focus on absolute social mobility, but herein lies the second problem: absolute social mobility, or ‘better jobs for each generation’,¹⁶ is not something governments actually have much control over – it is a symptom of global economic change. Furthermore, even if professional occupations rapidly increase in number over the coming years, there will always be a need for low-skilled jobs. The people who serve at check-outs and coffee counters, who clean our streets or do essential manual work in a range of industries, make an indispensable contribution to our economy, but are neglected by a focus on absolute social mobility. And it is difficult to see how social mobility can be about fairness if it fails to address the pressing issue of proper social recognition for lower-skilled jobs through decent pay and better working conditions.

“When social mobility is employed in the policy-making sphere, it tends to involve politicians selectively quoting academic research that lends pseudo-intellectual weight to their cause ”

The third problem for New Labour is that evidence shows that social mobility tends to be lower in more unequal societies. High inequality creates degrees of social distance that are increasingly difficult to traverse. And the steeper the social gradient the more rigid it seems to become. So if social mobility is the goal, the first concern of government should be addressing underlying inequalities. And helpfully, although the evidence is patchy on the extent to which social mobility is improved by government interventions, it is beyond dispute that government policies can reduce inequality – directly through tax and benefits and indirectly through the design of public services. We will return to this point later.

Less important but worth noting are the methodological difficulties with social mobility. Changes in social mobility in the second half of the twentieth century were fractional and unclear

and there is little consensus on the overall picture. Depending on how you do the sums, the same data can be used to show increasing, decreasing and static social mobility.¹⁷ Part of the problem is that social mobility can be measured in terms of both income and class, but the two do not necessarily coincide so it is important to be clear which is being talked about. The Government is not. Take the example of a school teacher whose father was a bus driver and earned a comparable amount. The child may attain a higher socio-economic group, facilitated by educational achievement, but income mobility has not taken place. Is this progress on the Government’s terms, and if so why?

It is also clear that trends are not susceptible to short-term analysis but that a timeframe of decades rather than years is needed to yield sensible conclusions on the direction of inter-generational mobility (wherein, the less generous may say, lies the appeal to politicians). Finally, the causal complexity of social mobility makes changes over time difficult to attribute, inviting politicians to shirk responsibility or take the credit depending on how congenial the picture is.

So when social mobility is employed in the policy-making sphere, it tends to involve politicians selectively quoting academic research that lends pseudo-intellectual weight to their cause but which is itself disputed, in the process contradicting one another¹⁸ and illuminating neither problem nor solution. In short, the focus on social mobility allows our political leaders to continue to duck the question of the extent to which they desire to create a more equal society, let alone make the moral and practical case for such a society.

Why the ladder does not work

‘Opportunities to rise are not a substitute for a large measure of practical equality of income and social condition. The existence of such opportunities... depends not only upon an open road but upon an equal start.’

RH Tawney

Two people race each other up a high mountain. One is fit and healthy, is familiar with the route

¹⁶ Cabinet Office July 2009, p 16

¹⁷ Gorard 2008

¹⁸ See for instance, David Miliband in the *Guardian*, 5 March 2002, Alan Johnson MP in the *Independent*, 14 September 2006, and the Prime Minister’s speech to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 23 June 2008

and knows short-cuts, has received thorough training on survival in inhospitable terrain, has all the newest clothing and gear, has a support team at base camp, and is competitive and determined. The other is just in the clothes they are wearing, does not even have a map, must work on their own, is not confident about the route and the techniques needed to navigate it successfully, and is consequently convinced they are destined to do badly before they even start, happy if they just make it to the end. Guess who wins?

The notion of a ladder is central to the logic of social mobility and to the goal of equality of opportunity. This is the ladder of opportunity, up which those with talent and resolve will climb, displacing those who lack such qualities. It is essential that nobody should face unfair impediments on this ladder of life (for it applies far beyond the workplace) and so long as this is the case, we are told, fairness is achieved.

It is a compelling vision but fundamentally unsound. By its own logic, equality of opportunity as both goal and method does not make sense. The social ladder is all about relative advantage, but the race is only fair if everyone starts from the same point and has equal prospects of progressing. For that to be the case, equality of condition is the pre-requisite of the perfect operation of equality of opportunity. But in this age of individualism, equality of condition has been roundly rejected.

Instead, New Labour has argued that greater choice unlocks opportunity and helps make the race fairer. But here, two agendas have been conflated – improving the quality of public services and improving equal access to the benefits of public services. In key areas such as health and education, choice through deregulation has been presented as the panacea, but can be seen to work actively against equal outcomes. Where new opportunities become available to improve one's relative position as a public service user, these are ruthlessly exploited by the higher socio-economic groups, who have the resources and know-how to exploit any new benefits and protect their existing advantages.

In other words the strategies and resources, self-belief and social capital available to the better-off – or, in short, the accident of birth – mean that the social ladder will never be just. It may have a consoling semblance of fairness, but

a cursory look at inter-generational trends in the distribution of wealth reveals that it is simply a means for the powerful to bequeath their social and economic advantage to the next generation and of creating a type of social closure. The ladder abjectly fails to redistribute resources, power and, most crucially for its proponents, opportunities.

The next question then is this: even if the ladder could be made to 'work' properly, does it provide us with the right moral template for our social and economic relationships? The following sections will argue that a devotion to meritocracy through the pursuit of social mobility damages both our society and our individual wellbeing. They will show that the meritocratic principle:

- as a distributive mechanism, undermines equal worth
- promotes a hegemony of middle-class living and values
- damages community by a dogmatic focus on individual advancement
- is not concerned with happiness and emotional wellbeing
- requires and legitimises a level of inequality that harms us all.

The history of 'meritocracy'

'Even if it could be demonstrated that ordinary people had less native ability than those selected for high position, that would not mean that they deserved to get less. Being a member of the "lucky sperm club" confers no moral right to advantage. What one is born with, or without, is not of one's own doing.'

Michael Young

Michael Young first coined the term 'meritocracy' in his 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, and much to his vexation the concept has been misused ever since. His book was a sociological satire in which Young projected himself into the year 2034 and appraised the rise of the meritocracy that had occurred since the mid-twentieth century.

The society he described was unattractive, still riven by class distinctions but now ones that were based on 'an aristocracy of talent' rather than an

aristocracy of birth.¹⁹ Meritocracy had simply provided an alternative mechanism for entrenching a new economic and political elite. The reorganisation of class so that allocation of social position reflected gifts of talent and character legitimised a new discrimination, and one that the beneficiaries could convince themselves was right and fair. Young got to the heart of the matter when his 2034 alter ego said of the lower classes, 'Are they not bound to recognize that they have an inferior status – not as in the past because they were denied opportunity, but because they are inferior?'²⁰

“As with those who once supported the hereditary principle, the most vocal champions of meritocracy know that its harshest consequences will never be felt by them or theirs ”

Young painted a vivid picture of an estranged society, built around a dubious moral code. His book is above all a cautionary tale, for as with those who once supported the hereditary principle, the most vocal champions of meritocracy know that its harshest consequences will never be felt by them or theirs.

Equal worth and fair distribution

'Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me.'

F Scott Fitzgerald, 1896 – 1940

As a distributive mechanism, meritocracy undermines equal worth. Talk of the inherent worth of each and every human being is meaningless if we simultaneously accept a society in which ostentatious wealth exists cheek-by-jowl with unrelenting need, and in which the poor are taught to be grateful for the crumbs from the table of their better-off neighbours.

One of the particularly cynical legacies of Thatcherism that continues to poison public policy-making and from which New Labour has not entirely dissociated itself is the notion of the deserving and undeserving poor. The party seems

to have moved far from the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of each person that drove the founding fathers and mothers of the Labour movement. Increasingly, the not-so-covert message is that if you have fewer abilities or are not 'trying' hard enough, you are less deserving and your poverty is unfortunate but will hopefully be redemptive.

As an allocative mechanism for the labour market the ladder plainly has a logic. But it is a big moral leap to hold that material rewards (which are also how our society confers dignity and social status) should be distributed according to position on the ladder. First, because it should not be our success in the workplace that either denotes or confers worth. Second, because not everyone is capable of acquiring the traits that the labour market rewards, and equal opportunity does not take account of inherited differences in ability and values. And third, because the marketplace does a very poor job indeed of pricing the social value and public utility of different work.

The pay of many highly talented and extremely dedicated public sector professionals such as teachers, social workers and nurses is dwarfed by the six- and seven-figure remuneration packages of private sector executives and financial whizz-kids. How do we as a society comparatively value the public service provided by the committed childcare worker who plays a profoundly important role in the lives of the many children with whom he comes into contact, versus the public service provided by the businesswoman who turns around a clothing retailer and sells it on at huge profit? Apparently, by a factor of about 100 to 1, in favour of the businesswoman. Equally, the essential work of those in service industries and manual trades is much relied on by the middle classes, but paid a pittance.

Pay at the top has exploded over the past 30 years, continuing to grow at the onset of recession in 2008. We now live in an era when a typical FTSE boss earns 75 times what their typical employee is paid (in 1989 the ratio was 19:1²¹). The case has never been stronger for the establishment of a high pay commission to examine the economic and social implications of excessive remuneration.

The *quality* of employment found at different points on the ladder also matters. The degree of job

¹⁹ Young 1958, p 38

²⁰ *Ibid*, p 97

²¹ Peston 2008, p 10

insecurity for some people is invidious and entirely militates against a contented and stable existence. These people are forced to live month to month if not week to week in the constant knowledge that should they lose their job they have nothing to fall back on. This level of insecurity engenders constant anxiety and takes an understandable toll on any person's sense of self-worth.

Our position on the ladder is the foundation of social recognition. It is therefore internally contradictory to sanction a system that creates huge social distance and simultaneously to espouse mutual respect on the basis of equal worth. New Labour is foolish if it expects people to value each other as equals and therefore willingly accept their social obligations to one another, within a framework that legitimises vast discrepancies in financial rewards, life experiences and social prestige.

Embracing diverse destinies

'The Englishman's social ethic is less deep and exacting than that of other civilized nations because it deliberately includes only a fraction of the common human ideal.'

Wilhelm Dibelius

The meritocratic principle also promotes a hegemony of middle-class values. The ladder is linear – there is one way up, one way down and one destination: the achievement of employment success, money and associated social status.

However, human talent and human experience is rich and diverse, it takes us in many directions, with contrasting criteria of success. There is an intrinsic arrogance in the ruling class insisting that their choices, their way of life are what all should aspire to. Many from other social groups are proud of their origins and loyal to their neighbourhood and way of life. They want to be able to live with financial security, free from fear, crime and ill-health – but free too to make choices about their destiny. They survey with horror the numbing strictures and uniformity of middle-class living, its stresses and demands and social striving. They have much to teach the burnt-out office worker, the lonely millionaire and the rootless international businessman about alternative sources of happiness and different kinds of riches.

In order to change this state of affairs, the values by which we measure and reward people's life choices must be re-evaluated, recognising the infinite abundance of humankind's talents, virtues and inclinations, and creating the space for otherness.

Individual advancement versus the common good

'It is difficult to talk about the common good when we lose the ability to speak about duty, obligation and restraint, and find ourselves only with desires clamouring for satisfaction.'

Jonathan Sacks

Through its immoderate emphasis on individual advancement and by requiring people to be in a permanent state of competition with each other, meritocracy damages community. It is not difficult to see the corrosive effect that the ascent of self-interest has had on our social fabric. There is a crisis of hope in our homes and communities which emerged during the 1980s, an age of individualism when we began to lose belief in our capacity for goodness and generosity, to act in each other's best interests not just our own. Over time, this has resulted in social dislocation, loss of trust,²² an erosion in our commitment to civic values, and the disintegration of traditional bonds of family and community.

Jonathan Sacks speaks of 'a collapse in moral language' in the twentieth century – no longer are we driven by 'I should' but by 'I want', 'I need' and 'I choose'.²³ A chasm has opened up between our private morality and our social morality and we have become comfortable with the consequent discrepancy between the behaviour we expect from others and the morality betrayed by the limitations of what we are prepared to do for them.

The new norms for personal outlook and behaviour have been sanctioned by the rhetoric deployed by our political leaders. The language of responsibility has been contorted in recent decades to focus almost exclusively on the responsibility of individuals in straightened circumstances to help themselves – rather than on the moral duty of everyone in society to help those who are less fortunate than them. Politicians on the left seem as reluctant as their right-wing counterparts to

²² In 1959, 56 per cent of Britons said most people could be trusted. In 1999, this figure had halved to 29 per cent, but remained 64 per cent in Sweden and Denmark (Layard and Dunn 2009, p 7)

²³ Sacks 2002, p 3

reclaim the notion of ‘responsibility’ as an injunction more for the fortunate and privileged than the luckless and poor.

Perversely, the establishment of the welfare state must take some of the blame. The reform of the poor laws in the mid nineteenth century transferred responsibility for social protection from the community back to the individual. With the formation of the welfare state in the mid twentieth century the state took on this responsibility. As government moved in to ensure that those most in need were properly looked after, the rest of us moved out. We no longer had to shoulder a day-to-day burden of care towards the members of our community because that was now the job of the state. A modern welfare settlement must therefore re-engage all society – state, community (such as charities and civic institutions) and individual citizens – in taking a practical responsibility for the welfare of each.

There is reason for cautious optimism; signs that people are tired of distrust and egoism, impatient to co-create a better way of being. From single-issue campaigns to community groups, from blogs to academia, people are exploring an alternative narrative for living, one that is guided by ‘the law of love’²⁴ made manifest in mutuality and in a shared vision of a future in which we can all prosper.

Trade unions and other organisations that foster social participation and solidarity have a central role to play – one that should be welcomed and, where necessary, enabled by government. These types of institutions embody and give life to our values and ideals. It is important therefore that government stops treating labour as just another economic input, but sees it first and foremost as a social good, a source of dignity and social worth. The most powerful way of doing this is through practical policies that encourage union membership and promote the good work agenda.

It could be said of New Labour’s protagonists and chief apologists that they are not misled so much by a desire to provide succour to the wealthy as by an unduly pessimistic view of human nature. By building policy around people’s proclivity for competitiveness and desire to better themselves even at the expense of others, such behaviour has been encouraged and elevated. But there are plainly nobler human traits that government can seek to cultivate. The ascendancy of self was highly contagious – so too could be the rejuvenation of

mutuality, cooperation and social citizenship. In particular government should consider how best to foster and reward the better self, creating a new vogue for kindness and altruism that strengthens the unseen bonds that tie us to each other’s future.

Social democrats must be bold in advancing a social ethic that goes far beyond self-realisation, and that appeals to people’s moral sense and concern for others. The qualities that each individual can bring to society, harnessed together for the common good and set to work for a shared purpose, are far greater than the sum of their parts and have the potential to be the engine of social transformation.

A ladder to happiness?

‘The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.’

Jeremy Bentham, 1748–1832

Meritocracy is not concerned with happiness, but our economic and social policies must be. If the rungs of the ladder were clearly correlated to increases in personal happiness, social mobility would be more defensible, but it has been shown by economist Richard Layard and others that beyond a certain level of subsistence income, greater wealth does not equate to greater happiness.

The last 50 years have seen huge increases in real income in the UK, but happiness levels have remained static while depression has risen.²⁵ Interestingly, Layard points out that while people become happier when they become more affluent relative to others, in the West, the level of happiness of whole societies has not increased as they have become richer. He concludes that ‘whether you are happy with your income depends on how it compares with some norm’ and that norm depends on social comparison and habituation.²⁶ In other words, the constant race for material self-betterment cannot be won – at the individual level there is simply no finish line; at the level of society it is therefore entirely self-defeating.

We are taught from the earliest age that personal fulfilment lies in acquisition – of money, possessions, status and power. Our overall wellbeing and happiness is seen as a natural function of these things, or simply ignored, the

²⁴ Layard and Dunn 2009, p 6

²⁵ Layard 2005, p 36

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 42

territory of preachers rather than politicians. In this sense, politics (and economics) have not kept up with the findings of modern psychology and sociology, which have much to tell us about the real sources of wellbeing – family relationships, health, work, personal freedom, community and friends.

The demands of a strong and efficient economy can conflict with the enhancement of personal wellbeing. One example of this is mobility. From an economic point of view, mobility of labour is a good thing, contributing to efficiency and lower costs, and various policies at national and international level have therefore sought to encourage it. But economics does not concern itself with consequential effects outside its sphere – in this case, the damaging impact on community and family life, on mental health, and on levels of interpersonal trust.²⁷

The question of whether we desire a richer society first and foremost or a happier one is not an abstract point. It is fundamental to the values framework that will inform the calibration of our tax system and the design of our public services. Redistribution that enables the poorest in our society to have access to the external sources of dignity – a decent income, a comfortable home, a pleasant neighbourhood, first-class education and healthcare – will cost the wealthiest in terms of their disposable income, but not in terms of their happiness, as they profit from stronger social institutions, better social outcomes and the unity of common purpose.

The happiness of the greatest number is a proper and exciting goal for public policy, and one with broad appeal. It should be explicitly placed at the centre of both the development and evaluation of new and existing policies and programmes.

Inequality – the downfall of us all

‘The truth is that both the broken society and the broken economy resulted from the growth of inequality.’

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

Meritocracy requires and legitimises a level of inequality that harms us all. It is often said that so long as living standards are rising for everyone,

the gap between rich and poor should not matter. But it does. It matters for both moral and practical reasons.

First, what kind of morality are we advancing if we consent to a society where the rewards for the toils of the many amass to only a few? By this morality, wealth creation is the acme of human achievement and the proper object of all human effort. Seduced by the lifestyles held out to us by advertisers and celebrities, and inured to the futility of the endless consumption fathered by comparison, we seldom question the impact of our greed on our souls, much less the souls of others, even as our communities and social infrastructure splinter around us.

Second, inequality affects us all, across the board, in real and concrete ways. The body of evidence demonstrating this has been growing for some time and most recently brought together in Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s book *The Spirit Level*, which looks at the empirical effects of inequality.²⁸ By combining data on a range of outcomes, including mental illness, drug use, life expectancy, educational performance and homicides, the authors come up with an up-to-date index of health and social problems for over twenty rich countries and compare each country’s score to its level of income inequality. The resulting graph shows an extraordinarily close correlation between health and social problems and inequality. A corresponding graph comparing national income per person and the index of health and social problems shows no correlation between the two.

What is crucial here is that it is not only the poorest who suffer as a result of inequality. The most unequal countries show worse outcomes for people at every level of society compared with those on a comparable income in more equal societies. Wilkinson and Pickett argue that much of the reason for this lies in the destructive nature of social comparison, which is naturally greater in more unequal societies, fuelling consumerism and causing heightened competition, anxiety and alienation at every level, with concomitant health and social problems.

These findings reinforce the case for ‘progressive universalism’ in our tax and benefits systems. Universal benefit systems reflect the belief that inequality is something that concerns all society. They also send a message to those on middle

²⁷ Ibid, p 138

²⁸ Wilkinson and Pickett 2009

incomes that the contributions they make and the risks they face are recognised by government and society. Such systems make social insurance a truly collective project, attracting greater public support and refocusing attention on the enabling potential of benefits.

The Spirit Level argues that we are the first generation that has got to the end of what economic growth can do for us, in terms of health, education, security and happiness. The evidence shows that for developed countries, it is not the wealthiest countries that do best in these areas but the most equal, and that therefore we should be more concerned about inequality than average living standards. This means we must seek new answers to the central question of how to improve the quality of life for everyone, and our understanding of the effects of inequality should lie at the heart of a new orientation for public policy-making.

We have become dangerously unaware of the fact that the destinies of the weakest are bound up with ours. The ‘them’ is unavoidably part of the ‘us’. It is not only that the humiliation of the poor diminishes us, as individuals and as a society, but also that it materially affects us – contributing to alienation and a whole host of poor social outcomes. Redistribution and collective responsibility are not zero-sum games where the more we share with others the less we have for ourselves. They are ways of living and of being that mean we are all better off.

Beyond markets

‘We are not mere instruments of the new economy. We are not slaves to its technological trends. And we should not misdirect the blame for its less desirable, more worrisome consequences. As citizens, we have the power to arrange the new economy to suit our needs, and in so doing to determine the shape of our civilization.’

Robert Reich²⁹

So much for the meritocratic ladder and the society it creates. But what about the wider claims made for neo-liberal capitalism and the importance of unhampered markets?

The largest chapter of the white paper *New Opportunities* is entitled ‘Success in the global

economy’. From here we are not surprised that the remainder of the document tends to talk of the people of Britain primarily as units of economic production. The merits and morality of neo-liberal capitalism and rampant consumerism are not questioned. Enterprise and innovation are the buzz words that will make Britain wealthy again – oh, and fair too.

These issues are under the microscope as never before, as a result of the catastrophic collapse of an international finance system we had been taught to trust. Questions that were previously seen as the preserve of lefties and dreamers, about the inherent defects and considerable externalities of our neo-liberal capitalist system, are now being posed every day in our newspapers, work places and homes. We could never really fathom how a system at least partly predicated on private vice (greed, capriciousness and unconstrained individualism) might beget public virtue, but while our pension pots prospered and our ISAs flourished we were prepared to go with it.

Now that the whole edifice appears to be collapsing around us, the question we are faced with is, should we shore it up, erect temporary scaffolding, or tear it down, with not a little pleasure, and look anew at the systems and more importantly the values we want to govern our relationships and transactions?

This question is entirely bound up with the challenge of creating a more just society. Some kind of market is inevitable and desirable. But the space in which day-to-day transactions take place should appeal to the best not the worst in human nature and corporate behaviour, enlarging us as individuals and as a society. The challenge seems to be twofold. First, to construct and regulate markets in the name of the values we wish them to exemplify – moderation, concern for others, collective responsibility, egalitarianism, probity and environmental protection. The touchstone for this new social market economy would be the production and reproduction of patterns of public benefit that are equitable and enduring. And our relationships in the broadest sense would profit too. There is a foreseeable osmosis that occurs between the systems that govern our lives and our behaviour as individuals and it is no wonder that during the zenith of a financial system that thrives on greed and selfishness, our society has become more fractured, less caring. Crucially, the new economic framework

²⁹ Reich 2001, as quoted in Sacks 2002, p 67

would also recognise the environmental limits to growth and confront the three-fold challenge of resource-scarcity, escalating pollution and dramatic population growth in mapping a sustainable future that does not require fatally harming our natural world.

Second, the left should unambiguously demarcate the proper boundaries of market mores, and establish that markets are not only an inappropriate framework for some transactions (the provision of education, the delivery of healthcare) but actively work against just outcomes in these spheres. The operation of markets must therefore be confined to certain realms rather than providing an overreaching philosophy for the organisation of society.

The economy is about making money, but the most important elements of our lives do not have a monetary value and are not up for exchange. We ignore at our peril the accumulating evidence that our happiness and security, our environment, our family relationships, our social institutions and our community bonds are subverted, not nourished, by the unbridled rule of capitalism.

The real task

‘Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.’

Martin Luther King

If markets come to dominate every area of society and are about those who have goods, money or services to exchange, what about those who have none of these things to bring, or who lack the social and cultural capital to maximise what they do have?

Social justice must go so much deeper than simply clearing the way for those who are able and tenacious. It is above all about how we look after those who may have less to contribute, who encounter bad luck or who simply make mistakes – factors that public policy can seek to mitigate but will never eliminate. They may be teenage mothers, care leavers, repeat offenders or refugees; they may have long-term health problems, learning difficulties or drug-related

problems; they may be homeless or in abusive relationships. Or they may quite simply have fewer inherited abilities, having to work ten or twenty times harder at things that come easily to others.

“To help the most marginalised, and help them gladly, we need an ethic born of love, kindness, sympathy and generosity.”

In many ways the test of any society – the test of our humanity – is how as a society we treat these groups. Those who need to receive before they can give back. They have become increasingly neglected and neither coercion and exhortation nor a social mobility narrative that turns on equal opportunity will help them. For an approach that focuses on opportunities and not on the human condition cannot speak to those for whom lack of opportunity is not in fact the chief problem.

To help the most marginalised, and help them gladly, we need an ethic born of love, kindness, sympathy and generosity. These words currently reside at the outermost fringes of political discourse. Qualities that we praise and seek in our personal relationships and conduct, we dismiss as sentimental or sources of inefficiency in the design of public services and the organisation of the economy.

Yet core values such as these are too important to be confined to the private domain. If contemporary politics is to speak to the human condition in total, not just to our material welfare, we must openly and actively debate the moral values we wish to underpin and overlay our relationships and institutions, in recognition of the correlation between these values and our day-to-day happiness. Moreover, the left should not pretend that this does not involve difficult choices, but be real about the conflict that exists between some goals: Where there is incompatibility between efficiency and co-operation, wealth creation and social solidarity, competition and emotional wellbeing, individual choice and the common good, one must be chosen to lead, the other to follow.

Social democrats cannot create a just and unified society without helping those who are

most in need, suffering at the fringes, and they cannot help these people without being courageous in making the moral and practical case for the right choices.

What kind of equality?

‘This man is freed from servile bands
Of hope to rise or fear to fall,
Lord of himself, though not of lands,
And having nothing yet hath all.’

**Sir Henry Wotton’s description
of the happy man, 1614**

For the concept of fairness to have relevance to ordinary people and become a catalyst for a just society, it must be rooted in the vitality of human experience. Fairness is not an academic concept; it is action and condition, perhaps most easily identified through its absence: the collection bowl of a homeless person; the overcrowded, damp home of a young family; the asthma of a two year old living on a polluted main road; the empty purse of a single mother.

Greater equality is required for greater fairness. But what level and type of equality are we talking about? The left needs to be clear that this is not the politics of envy and that they do not aspire to a level of equality that blunts incentives to a degree that is counter-productive for society as a whole. Progressive increases in tax rates must stop well before complete equality is reached – but the rich can comfort themselves that we are a long way off that point. What is required is a sensible balance. Not no social gradient but a much less steep gradient, halting the insidious cycle of status competition, social anxiety, consumption and greater inequality, and creating better social outcomes for all.

As regards the type of equality, this pamphlet has sought to expose the dangers of an excessive focus on equality of opportunity. Which then begs the question, what other kinds of equality are we talking about?

Inspired by the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, James Purnell MP has recently used the platform of Demos’s ‘Open Left’ project to espouse equality of capability as an appropriate objective of the centre-left. Purnell’s approach rightly concerns itself with inequality of

power as well as inequality of resources, but can only be useful if the links between these two are rightly understood. There is a danger that equality of capability is simply a re-casting of equality of opportunity unless it recognises that an equitable distribution of resources is the absolute precondition of any redistribution in capability and power.

Freedom is a useful alternative lens through which to consider equality. We are familiar with the two sides of the freedom coin – freedom from and freedom to. We all wish to be free from crime and insecurity, from ill-health and destitution, from discrimination and ill-treatment, and these days consider such things our right. But a more complete understanding of freedom encompasses the fullness of human aspirations, diversity and potential – freedom to make our own choices and follow our own path; freedom to maximise our talents; freedom to be true to our race, culture or religion; freedom to be happy; freedom to participate in community and society at every level; freedom to forge respectful, dependable relationships; freedom to be valued and to know dignity.

This broad and optimistic conception of freedom suggests that far from equality being antithetical to freedom it is in fact a requirement of freedom. Partly because my freedom requires your freedom, but primarily because inequality works against positive freedoms by creating a hierarchical and stratified society that encourages competition and individualism, and that prejudices life chances, stifles diversity and undermines healthy human relationships.

Paradoxically, more freedom requires a strong centre and an effective public sector. ‘Secure people dare’ is a slogan of the Swedish Social Democratic Party.³⁰ Security works as a springboard for those who might otherwise be reluctant to improve their circumstances, fearful of being in a worse place from where they started as a result of pursuing a new opportunity. In order to encourage people to take the initiative, to act as if they truly are free to create their own destiny, the state must give them confidence that there is more than a safety-net in place should things go wrong, but a strong platform from which they can re-launch. This is as important for people on middle incomes as those on low incomes.

Through recognising uniqueness, equality of freedom reminds us that in terms of public

services, equal provision should not mean identical provision, but equal care in ensuring that each individual's needs and interests are identified and met.³¹ This necessarily means that in order to put right the accidents of birth, some will receive more and others will give more over the course of their life.

The notion of equality of freedom also goes some way to addressing concerns that greater equality is about imposing a dull uniformity on everyone or, worse, is a way of pulling down the successful and better-off to the level of the less fortunate. On the contrary, equality of freedom is not about dampening down our dreams and hopes, but ensuring that we all have wings to fly. It impels us to think not only about why some freedoms are beyond the reach of so many from the day they come into this world when for others they are received as a birthright, but also about why a sense of freedom eludes many on higher incomes despite their material security.

Finally, equality of freedom signposts the practical policies social democrats must stubbornly pursue – excellent schools for all children, health services that reach those who need them most, decent homes for everyone in clean and safe surroundings, personal autonomy within supportive communities, and a living wage that enables people to play a full part in society – and the elements of modern living they must continually confront – such as consumerism and individualism – in order to discredit the economic and political doctrines that rely on them. Above all, it points to the good society we all seek and provides a distinct, far-reaching and hope-filled expression of the left's core values – equality, solidarity, democracy and inclusion.

* * *

New Labour sees the creation of a fair society as one of its most pressing tasks. What it means by 'fair' is not entirely clear, but the final sections of this pamphlet will propose some immediate and relatively straightforward policy measures that would fulfil a modern social democratic definition of the word. None are new, and in order to address the question on the Government's own terms, all are concerned with equality of opportunity, as well as equality of freedom. They are divided into three sections – firm foundations for

children and families, social equity in education, and progressive taxation. They are by no means comprehensive, but provide a strong starting point.

Firm foundations for children and families

'Rightly regarded, the preparation of the young life is obviously the greatest of common interests.'

RH Tawney

Inequalities in outcomes between better and worse off children emerge right from the start. Early findings from the Millennium Cohort Study revealed that by the age of three, the vocabulary scores of children of graduates were twelve months ahead of those of children of the least-educated parents.³² Variations across a range of health outcomes were also emerging. There is evidence that some inequalities in outcomes for children are actually widening. In 2000/02, the infant mortality rate for children from lower social groups was double that of children from higher social groups, and had widened since 1994/96.³³

Early support for children and families most vulnerable to the impacts of poverty is essential, and must start in pregnancy. Under this Government, there has been a new and welcome emphasis on the role the early years play in shaping life chances. The priority attached to this area has been reflected by the plethora of new initiatives and sizeable resources directed to the early years. Some 3000 Sure Start children's centres have opened across the country, with an estimated reach of 2.4 million families, and a further 500 due to open over the next year. Over one million new childcare places have been created since 1997, and maternity pay and leave have become more generous.

Sure Start children's centres bring together services for early education, healthcare, childcare and family support in disadvantaged areas. But the National Evaluation of Sure Start found in 2005 that the programme was failing to help the most disadvantaged families. This led the Government to re-focus its efforts on identifying and reaching these families, and the 2008 evaluation was cautiously more positive.³⁴ However,

31 Tawney 1921, p 39

32 Centre for Longitudinal Studies press notice, 11 June 2007

33 Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty 2006, p xiv

34 National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team, March 2008

there is still evidence of some variation in the quality and success of Sure Start services,³⁵ and concern that going forward there are simply insufficient resources to ensure the roll-out succeeds, and in particular to ensure that the most deprived families are properly identified and services proactively taken to them.

It is arguable that the emphasis on the need for parents to return to work has meant that the social impacts of parents spending less time with their children have been neglected. Seventy per cent of mothers of 9–12 month olds now do some sort of paid work, compared with 25 per cent just 25 years ago,³⁶ and it is unlikely that this does not have wider implications in terms of child development and family relationships. The Government says that work must be a real and profitable option for all parents, and that paid work is the best form of welfare. But it also states that parenting is one of the most important social goods. If this is true, it should be reflected in the structure of benefits and tax credits, making staying at home to care for children a real option for all fathers and mothers, not just the better off.

Of course the most efficient way of tackling the multiple symptoms of child poverty is by eradicating it in the first place. In 1999, Tony Blair pledged that Labour would do just this – halving child poverty by 2010/11 and getting rid of it altogether by 2020. Resources followed this undertaking and child poverty fell sharply in the six years to 2005. However, since then progress has stalled and even been slightly reversed.

It is now highly unlikely that the Government will hit its target for 2010/11. To do so, child poverty would have to fall by an average of 400,000 a year from 2007/08 to 2010/11 – when the average fall for the past nine years has been 60,000 a year. Researchers from the Institute for Fiscal Studies have estimated that to achieve this, additional spending of around £4.2 billion a year is required – this year's Budget allocated less than £0.2 billion.³⁷

Child benefit, income support and working tax credit are all key benefits for low income families, which continue to be uprated only in line with inflation. So long as the relevant benefits and tax credits are not increased at least in line with average earnings, families dependent on them will fall behind relative to the rest. In 2007/08 – a year in which poverty and inequality both grew –

inflation averaged 4.1 per cent while most low-income households saw their benefit entitlements rise by between 3 and 3.7 per cent.³⁸

The Government must also revisit policies whose success depends on high employment. Work as the route out of poverty was a credible mantra for Labour's first two terms as employment among low-income families kept rising, but it is considerably more problematic in current conditions, with the economy contracting and unemployment soaring. In such circumstances, the impact of in-work tax credits will decline and the generosity of core benefits such as income support will become more important.

Policy proposals for a fairer society

1. Entitle all new parents to at least eighteen months paid transferable parental leave, with a ring-fenced element of three months for fathers.
2. Allocate significant additional resourcing for the roll-out of Sure Start children's centres, in order to increase their capacity to identify and take services to families most in need.
3. Ensure that overall benefit levels for children of low-income families, in and out of work, increase faster than average earnings.

Social equity in education

'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.'

Nelson Mandela

The neo-liberals' deluded belief in the miraculous powers of marketisation and privatisation has permeated virtually every area of public-policy making and education is no exception. In the context of a discussion of social mobility and inequality this is particularly significant, because it is education above all else that has the potential to unlock opportunity, giving children the skills and confidence to succeed in overcoming inherited disadvantage. Rightly conceived and structured, the education system can act as a corrective to many of the disparities in condition and opportunity that may otherwise predestine life chances. Furthermore, the way we configure

³⁵ Anning and the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) Team, June 2007

³⁶ Layard and Dunn 2009, p 13

³⁷ *Ibid*, p 46

³⁸ *Ibid*, p 38

the system and distribute benefits gives children many a subtle lesson on their place in the world from an early age.

New Labour's record in this area is therefore particularly disappointing. There are still stark inequalities in educational outcomes for children from different social backgrounds. Just as worrying, hierarchies have become endemic to the whole architecture of the education system, through policies such as parental choice, diversification of school status, and university tuition fees.

Researchers have found that far from enabling greater social mobility, the expansion in education provision of the past 60 years has helped the 'haves' to entrench their privileged position at the expense of the 'have nots', and that the relationship between family income and educational attainment in the UK has actually strengthened over time.³⁹ In other words, having superficially 'equal' access to schools is not remotely the same thing as having equal opportunity to benefit from education. To achieve the latter, additional interventions are required on behalf of those who bring fewer resources and social capital to the table, rather than a *laissez-faire* approach that allows parental pushiness and iniquitous market effects to determine outcomes.

Crucially, this is about raising standards and expectations across the board through collective responsibility and effort, and greater democratic accountability. We should settle for nothing less than all our children achieving at the peak of their abilities, and recognise that this will not be accomplished through a stubborn fidelity to the dogmas of choice and diversity.

Education is not an appropriate playground for market principles. Education is a public good not a private commodity, it is positional (i.e. parents' choices have implications for children other than their own), and it is fundamentally undesirable for any 'producer' (school) to fail even in relative terms. If access to education turns on individual choice, the bedrock of the market, it is no longer a collective project. Competition, not co-operation, is fostered, from which emerge winners and losers as parents and children are encouraged to engage with the education system as consumers pursuing relative advantage rather than as citizens with a crucial wider role to play as co-producers of education and learning.

Furthermore, market logic requires that schools are differentiated hierarchically, not laterally. From this it follows that we desire for some schools to be inferior, in order to provide market incentives, and we accept that the education of some children will necessarily suffer from attending these schools.

“When choice is supreme, an equal ability to understand and navigate school entrance procedures is a pre-condition of equitable outcomes”

By privileging individual choice over the common good, schools are also deterred from actively helping those children most in need of additional support. Position on the odious league tables becomes a distorting priority, enticing schools to select by aptitude, by the back door if necessary, and encouraging teachers to focus on children closest to a given cut-off in test results, not on those well below it. The obsession with testing, as a public whip rather than an internal tool, also contributes to heightened anxiety among children and has resulted in a narrow curriculum focus and the neglect of the creative arts and practical subjects which are often more effective at keeping disengaged children connected with the education process.

When choice is supreme, an equal ability to understand and navigate school entrance procedures is a pre-condition of equitable outcomes. This clearly does not exist and the bewildering array of school types and the complexity of admissions criteria work to the advantage of those parents with the energy and wherewithal to engage with the system most effectively – in other words, those whose children are likely to be already relatively advantaged.

It is a testimony to New Labour's lack of conviction in the sphere of education policy that they backed off an earlier pledge to abolish grammar schools. These relics of the post-war years continue to be strongholds of middle-class interests, whose intake reflects more parental ability to pay for extra coaching to help their child pass the entrance test than innate academic ability. Only 2 per cent of children at grammar schools are eligible for free school meals

39 See for instance Blanden and Gregg 2004, and Nunn et al 2007 for DWP

compared with 14 per cent nationally. Worse, the 11+ exam designates the majority of children in an area 'failures' at the age of eleven, assigning them to secondary modern schools where they perform worse than their counterparts in comprehensive schools. Importantly, research has also consistently demonstrated that the most able 25 per cent of comprehensive school pupils achieve at least as well as their contemporaries in grammar schools.⁴⁰ In other words, schools that have an academically and socially balanced intake level up in terms of aspiration and achievement, not down, as their detractors claim.

Academic selection is also being given a new lease of life through the increasing number of schools that are becoming their own admissions authority. In 2008, less than 1 per cent of community and voluntary controlled schools operated partial selection by ability in a subject area, compared with 15 per cent of academies and 14 per cent of foundation schools.⁴¹ These schools are an offence to a fair, inclusive and democratic education system. Locally unaccountable, they are based on the fallacy that sponsors from business, religious and other groups will exhibit a talent for raising standards which mysteriously eludes experienced educational professionals. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, the evidence to date suggests otherwise.

Grammar schools and academic selection embody and advance the meritocratic principle. It is no surprise then that the evidence shows that selection, like choice, acts as an instrument of social reproduction, reinforcing not redressing existing inequalities. It is understandably popular among parents for whom it provides an opportunity to deploy their superior resources to secure better outcomes for their children. But in the process it sanctions an educational segregation that is completely at odds with social egalitarianism, damaging the prospects of many children and therefore of society as a whole.

The same charge can also be laid at the door of private education, which bestows unfair advantages on the children of the privileged from the earliest age. In a perfect world there would be no such thing as private schools, because they serve to remove talent, energy and resources from the state sector and therefore work against the interests of the majority. Instead, there would exist an education system in which schools are unifying and represen-

tative microcosms of their community, bringing together the wealthiest and poorest, all cultures and all abilities, to learn together and grow up together. Private schools clearly work against this vision and they should not therefore be given charitable status that entitles them to about £100 million of tax relief each year.⁴²

Those who hoped that the assault on the comprehensive ideal which began under Thatcher would halt under a Labour government can rightfully feel betrayed. If anything, the implementation of the 'choice and diversity' agenda has accelerated over the past decade, and it is our children who continue to lose out as a result. In education the market is as capricious, as indifferent to the needs and interests of the individual and the health of society as a whole, as it is in business.

The Government has however directed considerable energy to expanding post-compulsory education, increasing opportunity and creating a more attractive menu of options for school leavers. The white paper *New Opportunities* sets out some of the key policies in this area, including the September Guarantee,⁴³ the New Deal for Young People and apprenticeships. However, it neglects to address the urgent reforms needed to higher education funding if universities are to become truly representative. Tuition fees and fear of debt continue to make university education a more risky route for working class children, for whom the costs of failure would be greater. The fairest way of resolving this is through the abolition of all upfront fees and the introduction of a hypothecated graduation tax. This would also introduce the social democratic principle that you do not contribute to your university education on the basis of what your parents can afford, but proportionately to the rewards you yourself later reap.

If we looked at our education system through the eyes of those who have the least power, we would probably feel a combination of bafflement and hopelessness. To create a more just and equal society, it is an urgent task of Labour to redesign the system around the core principles of:

- educational excellence
- comprehensive and representative intakes
- equitable outcomes
- democratic institutions and processes.

40 Research carried out by Professor David Jesson at the University of York, cited in Campaign for State Education 2009

41 West et al 2009, p 18

42 Private schools do not fulfil the definition of providing a public benefit under guidelines produced by the Charity Commission. See the Charity Commission Supplementary Public Benefit Guidance on 'The advancement of education for the public benefit', December 2008, which includes the following principles:

1c – 'Benefits must be balanced against detriment or harm.'

2b – 'Where benefit is to a section of the public, the opportunity to benefit must not be unreasonably restricted by ability to pay any fees charged.'

43 The September Guarantee is the offer of a suitable place in learning for all young people completing compulsory education.

Policy proposals for a fairer society

4. Abandon the fiction of parental choice and create a system founded on the principle of pupil entitlement, using banded intakes based on the ability range in an area.
5. Standardise school status, including the abolition of all remaining grammar schools, halting the academies programme and private sector involvement in running schools, and outlawing special admissions policies for faith schools.
6. End charitable status for private schools, and redirect the £100 million saving into the state sector.
7. Abolish university tuition fees and introduce a graduate tax.

Progressive taxation

‘To grow rich without an injustice is impossible.’

St John Chrysostom

The role of a progressive taxation system is to act as a social adjuster, ensuring that an element of redistribution takes place in order to secure fairer outcomes and correct arbitrary market valuations. At present, the UK tax system barely fulfils this function, as demonstrated by our vast and widening income disparities. Moreover, most politicians are unwilling to make the case for taxation as an instrument of social equity, afraid as ever of losing the endorsements of business and wealth.

A society in which the poor are ground down by low wages, unacceptable living conditions and unrelenting need cannot prosper, and it is only through our tax and benefits system that the imbalance can be fundamentally redressed. Our social fabric will continue to disintegrate while the rich resent or avoid their social responsibilities, and while the system allows this. Taxes should be presented and understood as part of our civic duty, the membership dues for the society we live in, as well as our opportunity to contribute to stronger social relationships and institutions from which we all benefit.

Analysis of real income growth since 1997 reveals an interesting pattern. Across the middle

section of the income spectrum (between the 20th and the 85th percentile points) those lower down have gained the most. But if you look at the poorest fifth, the trend is clear – the lower your income, the lower the growth experienced. And at the top of the spectrum, income growth is strongest, with a spike for the richest 2 per cent.⁴⁴ The challenge for government is clear therefore – to construct a tax and benefits system that helps not just the relatively badly off, but the very worst off, and does this by redistributing wealth away from those highly affluent groups who have seen their incomes run away in recent years.

Robert Peston’s book *Who Runs Britain?* is one of a number of recent books that have helped to bring to a wider audience the iniquities of our tax system and the scandalous neglect of tax avoidance and tax evasion by our political leaders. Peston concluded, ‘In Brown’s Britain, the rule is that if you don’t want to pay tax, be impoverished or obscenely wealthy.’⁴⁵

Research for the TUC by tax expert Richard Murphy, estimated that tax avoidance costs the public purse £25 billion a year (£13 billion of this from personal tax avoidance).⁴⁶ This obviously has significant implications not only for the exercise of social justice, but also for the overall size of the public spending envelope available to government. This issue becomes even more acute at a time when education, health and social security are all at risk of cuts as a result of the huge debt incurred by the Government’s attempts to avert a catastrophic recession. Questions should also be asked about why the Government has unleashed a rather nasty campaign against those committing benefit fraud (cost £800 million a year, or 3 per cent of the tax avoidance bill), when they are simultaneously so feeble in their efforts to tackle the rich who exploit tax loopholes to avoid paying what society has deemed fair.

The wealthy pay a smaller proportion of their annual income in tax than those on the average wage. This undermines both the horizontal equity principle (those who receive the same income pay the same tax) and the vertical equity principle (those who receive higher income pay proportionately more tax). It is not only the result of tax avoidance and tax evasion but also because of the way income tax and capital gains tax work. Hedge fund managers and private equity

⁴⁴ Brewer et al 2009, p 20

⁴⁵ Peston 2008, p 342

⁴⁶ TUC 2008

investors can make massive sums on big deals, and although such windfalls share many of the characteristics of income, they are subject to 18 per cent capital gains tax, rather than 40 per cent income tax.

“For the taxation system to have credibility and perform its social function, it is essential that at every rung on the economic ladder you return proportionately more of your income in tax to the common purse”

Current taxation of inheritance is completely at odds with equality of opportunity. Inherited wealth is not worked for by those who receive it, and helps to ensure that economic privilege is passed down from generation to generation. It therefore works against both meritocracy and social mobility, yet it continues to be taxed extremely lightly and politicians of all parties seem to lack the courage to make the moral case for bringing it within the domain of progressive taxation. At the heart of the problem is the fact that the estate is taxed rather than the recipient. This makes no sense, given that inheritance is new, unearned income from the point of view of the beneficiary. Therefore fairness requires that it be taxed progressively in the same way that investment income is, allowing the lucky recipient to share some of their good fortune with those who through no fault of their own can never hope to receive such a windfall.

Rising living standards cannot be treated as a proxy for greater social fairness. Annual real average income growth in Great Britain over Labour’s three terms in government has been 2 per cent. Under 18 years of Conservatism it was pretty much the same (2.1 per cent).⁴⁷ But this conceals divergent experiences for different social groups over this period and significant rises in relative poverty and inequality. For the taxation system to have credibility and perform its social function, it is essential that at every rung on the economic ladder you return proportionately more of your income in tax to the common purse. It is depressing that New Labour still has not got this simple principle right and that there seems little political will to do so.

Policy proposals for a fairer society

8. Introduce a living wage, a minimum wage based on an analysis of the actual income required for an adequate standard of living, bringing more people out of poverty, reducing dependence on in-work benefits and helping to ensure that work always pays.
9. Lower the level at which the new 50 per cent tax rate kicks in, from £150,000 to £100,000, and introduce a minimum rate of tax for all those earning above this amount to ensure they do not benefit disproportionately from tax reliefs and allowances.
10. Crack down on tax avoidance and tax evasion, including abolishing the domicile rule and leading international efforts to eradicate tax havens.
11. Tighten the definition of what can be treated as ‘capital gain’ in business and financial transactions, ensuring that take-home windfalls on big deals are subject to income tax not capital gains tax rates (50 per cent, rather than 18 per cent).
12. Shift the burden of inheritance tax so that it falls on the beneficiaries of bequests (under capital gains tax rules) rather than on the estate, thereby increasing incentives to disperse wealth.

Conclusion

‘We have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.’

Barack Obama

In his provocative speech in July 2009, John Denham argued that too many people are uneasy about traditional notions of egalitarianism to make it a viable goal for the left. He was perhaps right to draw attention to how feebly politicians have made the case for reducing inequality. But rather than concluding that the left should therefore modify its principles to reflect current attitudes, he could have instead insisted, as Brendan Barber did in response to the same Fabian research, that ‘the point is to change the world, not to interpret it’.⁴⁸ To this end, Denham

⁴⁷ Brewer et al 2009, p 9

⁴⁸ Barber 2009, p 3

could have cited recent data showing that people at every level of society suffer worse social outcomes as a result of high inequality. He could have talked about what a powerful force for change such data would be if it was more widely understood, and how the challenge is to address the concerns of those on middle incomes both by engaging them in an adult conversation about how inequality harms them too and by correcting erroneous assumptions about the circumstances of the poor. He could also have drawn attention to some of the other findings of the Fabian research – such as strong support among the majority of participants for progressive tax and benefits systems, as well as for highly redistributive policies (even if the principle of redistribution itself was not necessarily supported) and for targeted interventions to help the most disadvantaged.⁴⁹

In other words, when people are in possession of the relevant facts, considerable political space opens up for the implementation of egalitarian policies. And where concerns still exist, it would be nothing short of a tragedy if the left were to capitulate to these rather than holding fast to their values, and seeking to change attitudes through information and conversation.

Of course part of the problem is the absence of a consensus on what the animating principles of the left are and should be. Failure to engage with this crucial question has meant that New Labour has become a technocratic, ideology-lite political project primarily concerned with hanging on to power. It has lost its own language with which to describe the society it seeks and hence its ability to build an electoral coalition around clearly defined goals and values.

But social democrats must push on regardless and not wait for moral leadership that will never come. And to this end, perhaps their new organising principle should be equality of freedom. It is a notion that compels us to think about the ultimate destinations as well as the social and economic paths of both individual and society. It illuminates our responsibilities to each other and the importance of reciprocity, while making space for uniqueness and difference. It is an expression of egalitarianism that is about enabling and levelling up, concerned for people on all rungs of the social ladder. Unlike social mobility, its success does not rely on equivalent starting points

or on an unbalancing focus on the able and energetic, but on a commitment to meeting everyone where they are and equipping them to reach where they want to get to.

Today we are writing the next chapter for humankind – we have choices and we must restore belief in our ability to make things better. We do not want our age to be remembered as the one that had means without ends – unimaginable wealth and opportunity, but no vision or ideal or common purpose to put them to work for. Accepting the fact of global capitalism does not mean being indifferent to its worst effects or apathetic in our quest for the good society. Economic systems exist to serve us, and only do so if they embody our values and enable the realisation of the kind of society and the different way of living we seek.

We will have to be patient and resolute. After the war, it took 30 years of progressive social and economic policies to produce a significantly more equal society in Britain. Since 1979, it has taken a further 30 years to see that progress undone and inequalities reach new heights. We should therefore expect it to take at least another 30 years of cultural and political battle, innovative policy ideas and coalition-building to set our society on a radically different and better course.

In parts of southern Africa the word for hello literally means ‘I see you’. In our nation of strangers and competitors, we must learn to ‘see’ each other again – to see and understand each other’s particular needs and hopes; to embrace each other as friends and partners on a shared journey; and to agree that on this journey no one can succeed if anyone is allowed to fail. We may be told we are naïve and unrealistic, bound to fall short because of human frailty and selfishness. But we cannot wait for humanity’s moral perfecting before we seek to transform our society for the better. And the fact that we will not always live up to our ideals is no excuse for not setting our face towards them, and seizing this moment to build the good society.

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