

Growing social divide in Britain

Blair seeks to refute new study on the widening gap between rich and poor

By Simon Wheelan
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Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair has returned to London from a two-day tour of northern cities to promote the Labour government's report entitled "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity". Stung by recent evidence that graphically illustrates that the fabled North-South prosperity divide between Britain's regions is as wide as ever and growing, Blair has embarked upon a campaign to refute what he calls an oversimplified myth.

By seeking to deny the existence of a north/south divide, Blair has unwittingly drawn attention to the more fundamental division in Britain, that between the social classes. "Poverty and prosperity are neighbours in every part of Britain. The greatest division which exists in every region is between the haves and the have nots," he declared..

The prime minister's tour and new report are intended to counteract the damaging publicity created by a study released last week by the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research at the University of Bristol, "The Widening Gap". The report has been described as the most comprehensive work of its kind since the infamous Black report, which was suppressed by the Tory government in 1980. George Davey-Smith and his colleagues draw attention to the neglected but incontrovertible fact that money equates with good health, poverty means illness and earlier death, and that class position correlates with the state of one's health.

The researchers at Bristol University specialise in the scrutiny of comparative death rates, in order to demonstrate health inequalities. They believe that the health gap between regions is the widest on record and growing. Increasing inequality of income, lifestyle, educational opportunities and jobs results in thousands

of extra deaths every year in deprived communities. Life expectancy for professional men is now nine and a half years more than for unskilled manual workers and 6.4 years more for equivalent women.

If Britain were divided into two nations, one containing the richer regions and the other the poorer ones, there would be nearly 80,000 more deaths every year in the poorer nation because of inequality. Epidemiologists would normally call this a plague.

The study, which looked at health and wealth indicators by parliamentary constituency, found that the Scottish city of Glasgow topped the poor health table. Six of the city's constituencies are included in a table of the UK's worst 15. Infant mortality rates are twice as high in Glasgow Annesland than in Esher and Walton in Surrey. Average household incomes in the worst health areas are only 70 percent of those in the best health areas.

The researchers state that the gap between rich and poor has widened more rapidly in Britain and levels of poverty are higher than in the vast majority of mainland Europe. The health gap mirrors gaps in income, education and employment. So it comes as no surprise to find that those areas suffering the most sickness and the highest death rates contain Labour's traditional working class voters. Blair and some of his cabinet have their constituencies in the northeast of the country, an area which has been negatively affected by the collapse of industry and manufacturing over the last two decades.

The Labour government's report in response, "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity", highlights the same kind of class discrepancies, only on a more fundamental intra-regional basis rather than on an

inter-regional one. The exposure of such phenomenon by the government can only be described as an act of extreme folly. Blair claims that the programmes his government has introduced—like the New Deal workfare programme, a minimum wage and working families tax credit—have started to reduce divisions. “We are narrowing the gap for the very poorest of people in the country,” he said.

The report draws attention to the fact that despite London and the southeast being the richest area of wealth and economic activity in Europe, 16 of London's boroughs are among the 50 most deprived local authorities in the country. The northern city of Leeds is now one of Europe's most affluent, with a per capita output 9 percent above the EU average. However just 30 miles down the M1, Sheffield's per capita income is only 75 percent of the EU average. Of the smaller towns—which surround Sheffield in the region of South Yorkshire—Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster average just 65 percent of the EU average.

Even these disturbing figures don't tell the whole story. Leeds' economy may be in a healthy state, but the city is home to extremely deprived wards such as Hyde Park and Seacroft. Sheffield on the whole is very poor, but its Hallam constituency is ranked fourth in the country's good health league table, according to “The Widening Gap” report. Hallam has the highest concentration of professional qualifications of any constituency in the country, making it effectively Britain's most middle class suburb.

The day after Blair's offensive, further evidence was released that complements the findings of the Bristol University report. A Joseph Rowntree report, in conjunction with the New Policy Institute, utilises a collation of income distribution, social class and other signs and symbols of inequality and social division. Contrary to the claims of the Labour government that it is narrowing inequalities, the report contains evidence that the opposite is occurring—inequalities are widening and the process is accelerating.

The report finds that Labour's policies are making little if any impact upon levels of poverty and inequality. There is “no general pattern of improvement” and health and education indicators are possibly getting worse. The evaluation is based upon a number of indicators of social exclusion, ranging from the number of people on low incomes, rates of obesity

and depression. Many of the worsening indicators relate to health, buttressing the claims made by the Bristol University. Peter Kellner for the Public Policy Research argues that the cult of low taxation cultivated by the Labour party means “The distribution of money incomes is certain to remain unequal, and may become more so.”

The government is currently compiling an alternative index of social exclusion, but critics believe its criteria will correlate closely with the government's main policies, i.e., job creation rather than the reduction of inequality. After their election in 1997, Blair remarked that he and his party would not deserve reelection if inequality had not been reduced by the end of this present term. This promise has since been quietly dropped and in its place they have pledged to end child poverty in the next 20 years. Trade Secretary Stephen Byers proclaimed wealth creation to be more important than wealth distribution.

The prime minister's advice to those areas of the country currently failing in the global market is to “get out and sell themselves to the outside world”. The north must become globally competitive like the southeast, he stressed: “We need to do it consistent with a strong economy and also there's no way that we are going to put in additional money unless we are also getting the change and modernisation that we need.... We can't just throw money at it.”

But that very process of selling the workforce to international investors, to make cities competitive, necessitates the further retrenchment of welfare and social provisions in order to create an investment-friendly environment of cheap labour, low corporate taxation and hefty subsidies. He gave his usual promise of jam tomorrow, by making vague references to possible extra spending on public services if his party wins the next election. One area he deemed deserving of extra spending was transport, the other being law and order—a good indication of just how much Blair believes he will reduce inequality.

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