



Equality and
Diversity Forum

Shaping equality and fairness after the recession

A report of the Equality and Diversity Forum
Seminar Series

 **ORC** WORLDWIDE™

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Commission

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The views expressed in this report are those of the speakers and participants at the seminars, and are not necessarily those of the Equality and Diversity Forum or its members.

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Foreword

The members of the Equality and Diversity Forum (EDF) are leading charities and NGOs concerned with equality of opportunity. We have long been concerned not just with discrimination based on individuals' identities but also with broader issues of inequality and social justice: for some years now EDF has argued that the barriers holding people back on the basis of their race or age or gender, for example, are interwoven with barriers that hold people back because of their socio-economic status.

EDF has naturally, therefore, taken a close interest in the impact of the recession. We discussed the issues in March 2009 on the basis of a working paper, *The recession: time for a rethink*¹, by EDF's Secretary and co-founder, Patrick Grattan. EDF members were united in wanting to contribute to efforts to follow up the lessons learnt from the crisis, so EDF organised two seminars in late 2009 to discuss the implications of the recession for equality and social justice.

This report summarises the discussion at our events and some of the main implications of those debates.

Looking ahead, we will continue to challenge decision makers from across the political spectrum to do all they can to ensure the recession does not herald a return to rising inequality. We will be looking particularly closely at the impact of reductions in public spending on those who are already facing discrimination and disadvantage.

We are grateful to ORC Worldwide and the Equality and Human Rights Commission whose support for this initiative made the seminars possible and to all our speakers for their generosity with their time and ideas. We would also like to thank our core funders, including the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Barrow Cadbury Trust, whose ongoing support makes EDF's work possible.

The views summarised in this report are those of the speakers and participants at the seminars and therefore do not necessarily represent those of the Equality and Diversity Forum as a whole or its individual members, but I hope you find them stimulating perspectives on this important topic.



Sarah Spencer CBE
Chair



Introduction

As the full impact of the credit crunch and recession took hold in the winter of 2008-09 many commentators, including business and trade union leaders, politicians, academics, religious leaders and others², urged that we learn the lessons of the crisis and the years leading up to it. There was a widespread view that the country should not return to the status quo of the decade before the financial crisis: lessons should be drawn and changes in attitudes and policies should follow. Parallels were drawn with the experience in the years leading up to and following the Great Crash of 1929.

The issues addressed in the debates triggered by the credit crunch included:

- relative levels of remuneration across different sectors of the economy;
- the scale of economic inequality in the UK and how this compares with other developed countries;
- the impact of relative inequality on social cohesion, health, crime and other social outcomes³;
- the degree of transparency and regulation of financial and other markets;
- the balance of the fiscal regime;
- the role of public and private services, including the role of the state in a market economy;
- the relative share of responsibility for the crisis between financial institutions, regulators, government and individuals; and
- the implications of the crisis for social, community and individual values, including attitudes to consumption and the good life.

EDF's recession and equality seminars were designed to enable participants from government, NGOs, business, academia and think tanks to debate these issues together.

The first seminar – *Redefining equality and fairness* – was chaired by Sarah Spencer, Chair of EDF, and the main speaker was Tim Horton. Tim introduced research that he and Louise Bamfield conducted for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the drivers of public attitudes to inequality, to which Patrice Hall (ORC Worldwide), Bronwyn McKenna (UNISON) and Dr Zubaida Haque (Commission on 2020 Public Services) responded.

The second seminar - *Visions of the future: polity, economy and inequality* – was chaired by writer and journalist Bea Campbell and the main topic was how the debate about fairness triggered by the credit crunch might feed into new policy approaches to the problems of inequality. Neal Lawson (Chair of Compass), Alasdair Murray (Director of Centre Forum) and Jonty Olliff-Cooper (Head of the Demos Progressive Conservatism Project) were the main speakers, each taking a distinctive political perspective on the topic.

Key issues from debate at the two seminars

Importance of awareness of the facts about inequality and poverty.

A strong theme in both seminars was the influence that facts and evidence can have on public attitudes to the importance of tackling inequality and poverty: negative attitudes towards poorer people can change in the face of evidence of the scale of inequality. New evidence on inequality can be found in the reports of the National Equality Panel chaired by Professor John Hills and of Sir Michael Marmot's review of the causes of health inequalities⁴. The first Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) triennial review – the first ever overview of the state of equality and human rights in Britain by a statutory equality watchdog – is due to be published in October 2010 and is expected to include new indicator-based monitoring frameworks. The Office of National Statistics work on wealth and assets⁵, and extensive academic research undertaken for the EHRC⁶, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)⁷, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)⁸ and others all add to the available evidence base. The challenge for policy makers, opinion formers and NGOs is to use this effectively, expressing it in terms that relate to everyday life. The National Equality Panel speak of "widespread public ignorance" and suggest that their report be used as "a source of information to improve knowledge"⁹.

Are equality, fairness, social mobility and diversity the same or different?

There were differing views from seminar speakers and participants on whether equality and fairness mean the same thing. Fairness is increasingly used, as recent EHRC publications¹⁰, the Government's response to the National Equality Panel report¹¹ and numerous statements by all the main political parties show. But is equality an absolute that can be measured whilst fairness is a relative concept that depends on the perspective of the individual? In political and other contexts the words may mean different things to different groups. Even those who value equality may not all have the same goal

in mind: there are important differences between concepts such as equality of opportunity, equality of outcome, equality of treatment and equality of capacity. There is a danger of fudge and greater clarity allowing shared understanding about the words used would be helpful. Debates – some might say misunderstandings - about the term ‘multiculturalism’ in recent years illustrate the danger of leaving key terms unclear.

Lack of transparency and consensus on fairness. An important topic of public debate through the financial crisis was the need for greater transparency about financial markets, including about who receives what and on what basis. It was evident from research presented in these seminars that there is relatively little public agreement about what constitutes fair reward for different types of work. The re-emergence of the bonus culture in financial services – including the debate about whether bumper profits and bonuses at Barclays should be celebrated or condemned¹² - and the plans of the Obama administration and our own Government to limit or tax bonus pots mean that the issue remains a live one. However, this does not necessarily mean that a broad consensus on acceptable or fair ratios of income and wealth inequality in Britain is likely to emerge. The National Equality Panel¹³ provides a clear picture of income and wealth ratios that have been widening. If they are not acceptable at their current level, what is acceptable? This is a challenging political issue but cannot be perennially avoided.

Is there a long term global trend to increasing economic inequality? It is not yet clear what impact the credit crunch and recession - and the public spending measures needed to recover from them - will have on inequality in Britain. It is arguable that this impact will make itself felt in the context of an in-built tendency to increasing inequality. Significant inequalities have existed in most types of society in most eras, but it is arguable that globalisation and modern business and finance technologies are inexorably leading to increasing economic inequality in most countries, not just Britain. They may allow for the accumulation of great wealth in few hands faster than in the past. Ministers speak in terms of “stemming the tide” of inequality¹⁴ so Governments committed to greater equality of opportunity and social mobility are seen as battling to stand still, let alone reduce inequality. Is this a correct analysis? The factors at work here need to be explored in greater depth.

Are social hierarchies and segregation growing? In both seminars participants discussed the evidence on social segregation: the extent to which separate life styles defined by socio-economic status lead to gaps, or even gulfs, between different segments of British society. While such gaps have always existed on a significant scale, it may be that circumstances are now combining to increase social segregation. For example a possible unintended consequence of policies to encourage individual choice in education, housing, health and other public services may be more segregated experiences and unequal outcomes, arising from the unequal capacity of well resourced and poorly resourced households to exercise choice effectively. Both Labour and the Conservatives currently advocate greater choice in public services so there is a case for examining the potential contribution of different factors to social segregation more carefully.

Vital to make equality legislation work effectively. If the Equality Bill currently before Parliament becomes law, an extensive raft of new equality legislation by the current government will have been completed. The next stage is to make the legislation work effectively in practice: seminar participants felt that the gap between the theory and practice of equality legislation can be large. It was argued that if legislation works it will have implementation costs (such as the up-front costs of tackling age discrimination in health and social care), but these costs are significantly lower than the economic and social gains from tackling inequality and enabling significant groups to participate fully in the economy and society.

The relationship between the benefits system and inequality. Evidence presented to the first seminar showed that public attitudes to welfare benefit recipients are strongly coloured by negative stereotypes about people with low incomes. This stereotyping is encouraged by some media coverage and government rhetoric on tightening the benefits system: although far more money is lost to the Treasury through tax evasion than through benefit fraud, campaigns against benefit cheats have a much higher public profile. This is a complex field, including the potentially perverse impact of selective/means tested benefits on incentives to work and save. However, progress on tackling inequality does require the issues around welfare benefits and poverty to be disentangled. The benefits system could place greater emphasis on the fairness of rewarding those who contribute in diverse ways – parenting, caring and volunteering as well as paid work.

Seminar 1. Redefining equality and fairness

Tuesday 17 November 2009 at Inner Temple, London, EC4Y

Agenda

The first seminar, chaired by the EDF's Chair, Sarah Spencer, centred on a recent publication by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation written by Tim Horton and Louise Bamfield: *'Understanding attitudes to tackling economic inequality'*¹⁵.

There were three respondents to Tim Horton's presentation:

- Patrice Hall, Vice-President, ORC Worldwide
- Bronwyn McKenna, Director of Organising and Membership, UNISON
- Dr Zubaida Haque, Project Director for Equality and Cohesion, Commission on 2020 Public Services

Plenary discussion followed.

Sarah Spencer emphasised the important legislative progress on equality in the years prior to the recession, culminating in the Equality Bill going through Parliament at the time of the seminars. In contrast to this progress the evidence on recent trends in persistent disadvantage was less encouraging. In recession there was a danger of the impact falling hardest on those who were already the most disadvantaged.

Significantly the financial crisis had generated a new level of interest in and criticism of levels of inequality and the symbols of it, such as City pay. But with business under pressure there was also a view that equality and the measures to promote it were a luxury which we could not afford in difficult times. It was clear that the general public did not necessarily have much belief in greater equality, or in redistribution and equality measures as desirable ways to advance it. Hence this seminar sought greater understanding of public attitudes towards equality and fairness and what lay behind them.

Deirdre Golden, Director Global Equality Diversity and Inclusion Practice, ORC Worldwide described the history of ORC and its legacy of pushing forward the boundaries of equality issues, particularly in relation to employment. ORC started in the 1920s and its first publication 50 years ago was *'Employing the negro in American industry'*. The language had changed but the commitment had not.

**Tim Horton, Research Director at the Fabian Society:
'Understanding attitudes to tackling economic inequality'**

Tim Horton was co-author, with Louise Bamfield, of '*Understanding attitudes to tackling economic inequality*'¹⁶. The report was part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation programme on public attitudes to poverty and their impact on politicians and policies to address equality and fairness.

The findings were based on focus groups and research in four major cities around the UK. Participants were of working age and a broad range of socio-economic positions and political affiliation. Polling took place in November 2008 and February 2009 and was representative of the whole country.

The research objectives were to look at how people understood ideas about economic inequality and the drivers of public attitudes to inequality. Most polls established what people thought on a particular issue, but this was of limited use to policy makers who needed to know how people might respond to new developments. To predict that, one needed to know what was driving those attitudes. The aim was to find common ground to build a consensus on tackling inequality.

The report examined the underlying principles which inform how people think about what is fair, whether in pay or tax and welfare benefits etc. Different definitions of fairness were identified, for example on the basis of a person's needs or deserts or entitlement.

A minority of people were naturally egalitarian. They judge fairness on the basis of need. But more commonly people judge fairness on the basis of desert – that individuals get what they deserve; what they get out depends on the efforts they put in. These two approaches might well agree on some issues, but it would be for different reasons.

For example, there was anger towards the super-rich and excessive rewards at the top, especially in the middle of the banking crisis. For the egalitarians, that was because those people had more than they needed, but for most people it was because they didn't deserve it. The most common approach was that reward for effort was often not fair. Thus there was support for a minimum wage because people in low paid jobs often worked hard and deserved more.

It was important to understand that appeals for greater equality as an end in itself would fall on deaf ears. The view that there was something fundamentally wrong about a society where some earned so much more than others did not cut much ice. A traditional egalitarian view of 'say it louder' would not have much resonance with the majority of people.

A policy measure that resonated with what people thought was fair and deserved can command support across the political spectrum. For example there was support for a higher minimum wage and more financial support for carers, with little difference according to political party.

In addition to having views on who deserved what, people also developed psychological strategies about their own circumstances in relation to others around them, known as 'cognitive coping strategies'. It was not nice thinking the world one lived in was unfair. Inequality was painful to confront. Faced with such situations, people found it more comfortable to interpret the world in a way that made it appear fair. Rather than questioning existing inequalities, there was a tendency to justify them as fair so people invented or inflated the virtues of those on high incomes or denigrated those on low incomes because that made existing inequalities appear fair.

These coping strategies were a potential barrier to public discussion about tackling inequality. Some of the research took place before the credit crunch in September 2008, and some of it after. The credit crunch shook coping strategies and all of a sudden there was anger about whether high salaries were deserved. It was not yet clear if this will be a permanent or temporary phenomenon, but it was politically significant.

Many people believed that inequality was inevitable leading to a kind of fatalism about tackling it. People were asked to agree or disagree with a statement that inequality was inevitable in a market economy and that there was nothing you can do about it: 51% agreed with that sentiment. This fatalism reduced support for policies to tackle inequality and needed to be addressed to achieve political progress on the equality agenda.

The report examined the effect that inequality had on society as a whole. The recent book by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, '*The Spirit Level*'¹⁷ examined international data and found that countries with

more unequal societies had a greater range of social problems. The evidence indicated that income inequalities produced a hierarchy of status and social tension. Wellbeing was as much related to relative position in society as absolute levels of income and resources.

Participants in the research groups from all sides of the political spectrum were influenced by this evidence. They thought factors like this were important and provided evidence for doing something about inequality.

The report examined attitudes to welfare in the UK. There had been a sharp decline in support for welfare services in the last 20 years. One reason for this might be that people were opposed to redistribution or progressive tax and benefits. The evidence did not support this explanation. Once the redistributive effects of the tax and benefit system were explained, there was support in principle for progressive tax and benefits, and spending on services.

What drove the opposition to welfare and redistribution was negative attitudes towards those in poverty – often harsh, punitive attitudes. Even though there was anger about people on high salaries, attitudes towards those at the bottom were often more negative. To explore this asymmetry, the research compared examples of people free-riding at the bottom (claiming benefits with no expectation of getting a job) and at the top (tax avoidance). There was a much stronger tendency to ascribe blame at the bottom than at the top. It was the government's fault for letting someone avoid tax and get away with it. It was the individual who was to blame for exploiting the benefits system. Most people had wildly exaggerated ideas about the scale of benefit fraud compared to tax evasion – the reality was that personal tax avoidance costs about £13 billion a year, 15 times more than the estimated cost of benefit fraud.

A further illustration of 'cognitive coping' with inequality was a tendency to inflate the degree to which people at the top deserved their rewards and to understate it in relation to those at the bottom. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation research programme found that people were able to draw on both positive (J. K. Rowling and Alan Sugar), and negative (Fred Goodwin and 'evil' bankers) images of the wealthy. When it came to people on low incomes, there were only negative stereotypes – there was no positive image of a struggling, low income family.

There were two strong drivers for these negative views. The first was a widespread belief that adequate opportunities existed for everyone, so people were where they were through their own fault. If there was enough opportunity to go round, it must be the fault of the individual. That led to very individualised explanations for poverty and disadvantage and downplayed the role of structural forces beyond an individual's control. If the scale of inequality in the UK was to be tackled it required communicating and convincing people of the inherent barriers faced by some sections of society.

To address this people were shown evidence about the extent of different chances across society (for example, children from the richest quintile of households got twice as many good GCSEs as children from the poorest quintile). Seeing statistics showing that whole groups had vastly different life chances began to challenge assumptions about barriers. People were engaged by the evidence.

The second strong driver of negative views was the belief that people receiving benefits would never go on to make a contribution to society in the future. The implication was that money spent on them would be wasted.

Attitudes to immigration were closely related to attitudes to inequality and poverty. They were equally influenced by stereotypes not founded on evidence – a stereotype of an immigrant as someone who had come to the UK and gone straight onto the benefits system, something it was virtually impossible to do in practice. But even with immigration, the research found an underlying sense of fairness. Where an individual had recently come to the UK and had lost their job, the people recognised their right to claim unemployment benefit. People had an inclusive and developed sense of fairness when they felt that an individual's intentions were sound.

There was support for progressive policy interventions to tackle inequality of opportunity. In the case of programmes such as targeted home visits by health visitors, funding for schools in disadvantaged areas and incentives for teachers in those areas, people were prepared to prioritise expenditure for those who were disadvantaged at the expense of others. There was stronger support for such policy interventions after presentation of evidence about life chances. Showing people evidence and information did make a difference.

The evidence pointed to some general conclusions about how to engage the public in dialogue and campaigning on these issues. First, understanding people's different starting points and motivations: it was unlikely that most people would share the values held by most participants in an EDF seminar. Understanding where other people were coming from was essential. For example, the case for the minimum wage was not some generic appeal to greater income equality. It was a question of showing that people were working hard and deserved more.

The barriers to understanding social reality had to be systematically addressed. They included the lack of information or misinformation about how tax and benefits work and about the extent of benefit fraud, the reliance on negative stereotypes and the sense of fatalism about tackling inequality.

There was a need to connect with every day concerns. For example evidence about children and schooling can resonate with people's experience at the school gate in the context of their own children. Showing evidence that connects with every day experience was important.

Finally, showing people graphs of the different levels of inequality in different countries, with the UK and US as the most unequal and countries such as Sweden, Finland and Denmark as the most equal struck home. It challenged fatalism. So it was worth thinking about the kinds of information and evidence that can challenge negative attitudes.

Panel response: Bronwyn McKenna, Director of Organising and Membership, UNISON

Bronwyn agreed that it was timely to re-consider what was meant by a fairer society in the light of the recession. The equality debate needed refreshing, based on a good understanding of the social cost of inequality. There were some uncomfortable underlying truths about inequality which should not be ducked.

First, not all victims of inequality have popular appeal. It was encouraging when the media showed an interest in covering the battles fought by UNISON for women. But all too often the level of interest and press coverage was determined by whether there was a glamorous photograph to go with the story. Victims of inequality struggled to get

media coverage or popular support unless they were young, white, pretty, educated and metropolitan.

Inequality amongst working class and unqualified people remained invisible. Bronwyn agreed with Tim Horton that when issues surfaced it was often to ascribe blame. For example, working class women were blamed for making 'poor' career choices – going into the sidings of childcare or social care.

The value put on different types of work should be challenged, for example the low value of caring for the most vulnerable. The social capital created by different types of work should be measured and promoted so that it was properly revealed and rewarded.

Secondly, dressing up 'equality' as 'fairness' lacks honesty. It disguised the real issues and diluted the force of the concept. The Equality and Human Rights Commission's three year plan eschewed the word 'equality'. Equality was compressed into an objective which spoke only of fairness, opportunity, advantage. Encouragingly, equality was now reinstated in the EHRC's work programme.

Talk about diversity also muddled the message. 'Diversity' was decaffeinated equality. Diversity measures alone were not enough to deal with inequality. Progress would remain glacial if we relied on diversity and avoided implementing measures on equality.

The reality was that in the past 30 years, middle and low income households had fallen steadily behind higher income groups. The share of national wealth going to wages had dropped. Of every £100 generated in the UK economy, only £53 went to wages. The remainder was profit.

Bronwyn commended a recent publication '*Unfair to middling. How middle income Britain's shrinking wages fuelled the crash and threaten recovery*'¹⁸ which describes the effects of this inequality in incomes on the rise in personal debt.

Thirdly, it should be recognised that tackling inequality required strong measures and carried a cost. If laws to tackle social and other inequality were going to make a difference then they had to hurt some people.

Failure to have effective laws carried other costs. As a society, we could choose to accept these costs but we needed to be honest about their existence. As a result of inequality of wages, poverty and the low level of the minimum wage, government spending on income support for working families including tax credit had risen from £18 billion in 1996 to £30 billion in 2006. The cost of inequality was shifted from the employer to the state and we all paid. In turn, the low wage economy created disincentives for those on benefits to move to poorly paid work.

In summary, a consensus on equality needed to

- deal with inequality head on – especially for those groups with the greatest needs;
- highlight the social costs of inequality;
- choose whether or not to bear those costs;
- expose inequality particularly among groups who were overlooked, and
- proclaim the benefits of equality.

Panel response: Dr Zubaida Haque, Project Director for Equality and Cohesion, Commission on 2020 Public Services

Zubaida's first reaction to the research findings was to ask what had happened to the public's empathy with others. The public's views of equality appeared to have changed. There was still a feeling that we must help those in greatest need, but this was strongly dependent on these groups playing by the rules and not abusing the system. One possibility was that public surveys on fairness were skewed unless the issues were explored in greater depth. Zubaida agreed with the JRF report that people were often not aware of the very real barriers that others faced in accessing services, benefits, employment etc. They were not aware of the social and economic costs of inequality or the contributions people made once they were reintegrated – economically and socially.



Dr Zubaida Haque
Commission on 2020 Public Services

Challenges to negative stereotypes of people – whether poor people, or immigrants, or Muslims – must play a strong role in thinking about inequality. Zubaida agreed with the research findings that it was important to improve the quality of public debate by highlighting more facts, social and economic costs and barriers limiting opportunity.

Contrary to the view expressed by Bronwyn, Zubaida saw fairness and equality as compatible with each other because fairness includes notions about ‘reciprocity’ or ‘mutual exchange’. There appeared to be tensions because equality was based on the notion that sometimes we needed to do more for people who have less or were less able to help themselves. The two concepts could work in tandem if fairness was perceived as allowing room for people to be motivated by their own interests as well be motivated by ‘community interests’.

Fairness and social cohesion were linked because fairness was as much about ‘cohesive and stable communities’ as it was about individual freedoms. If entire groups experienced unfair educational and employment opportunities, they would be alienated from the rest of society; there would be huge ‘social costs’ and no cohesion. This was the case with black boys in education (in terms of exclusions from schools); with women in part-time work or with white working class men in continuous unemployment.

Fairness included the idea that we are ‘responsible citizens’ as well, with ‘rights and responsibilities’. It also had to include the capacity to empathise with others. It was empathy which made us human; it enabled us to live in social harmony. Fairness meant striving to understand that people come from different circumstances, experience different levels of barriers and have different capabilities. Fairness was about treating people with respect and dignity – regardless of their circumstances and capabilities.

Panel response: Patrice Hall, Vice-President, ORC Worldwide

Patrice described how ORC’s work with commercial and other organisations related to the findings of the JRF research. Organisations were microcosms of society. The conclusions of the research were consistent with ORC’s experience of organisational change and creating fairer and more equitable organisations

One of the powerful arguments for effecting change was the broader

social costs of inequalities. ORC found that in the opening stages of work with employers it was the direct costs related to non-compliance with regulations which had an impact. Typically people changed in the first instance because of legislation, because someone told them to. Engagement came later, when people understood the benefits of making change and therefore began to support it for reasons beyond legislation.

The next part of the business case related to talent - the recognition that without casting a broad and fair net you were less likely to attract, develop and retain the best talent that was in the market place. The globalisation of markets meant understanding diverse cultural dimensions, being knowledgeable and supportive of them in order to realise the full potential of a global workforce.

An underlying issue was whether there is enough opportunity to go round and whether, if people made enough effort, then they would get the opportunities. Financial services were thought of as a 'meritocracy', but the data about the school performance of children from different economic and social backgrounds and data about the performance of an organisation's workforce could have a powerful impact. If one showed that talented people of different gender, race etc were recruited into an organisation but that at the end of the day only certain groups were making it to the top, then it was obvious to all that there must be something systemically wrong. It was clear that bias could be conscious and unconscious. Both were important.



Patrice Hall,
Vice-President, ORC Worldwide

So change involved identifying costs and organisational champions and bringing a human face to disenfranchised groups within organisations. It involved creating opportunities for more day-to-day business interaction. Equality was not academic and removed; it was the stories of people, their particular struggles, who they were and how they were contributing and attempting to overcome the hurdles and barriers that they faced.

Plenary discussion

Some of the points covered in the general discussion were.

- There were a set of social norms about what was right and wrong. These influenced how we think about costs associated with equality measures. For example, each year the British Chamber of Commerce produced the Burdens Barometer – measuring red tape and the cost of reasonable adjustments to premises. This document illustrated that there were various sets of assumptions about the costs and values attached to efforts to integrate people with disabilities into the economy – some accepting that the costs were justified by the objectives, others rejecting the costs as unacceptable.
- The costs of adjustments for disabled people in the work place were not related structurally to the gains and savings from bringing them into the workforce. This was graphically illustrated by the account from one deaf participant at the seminar of job seeking following redundancy and long years of unemployment, despite extensive qualifications and experience.
- The distinction between attitudes to inequality/poverty and attitudes to welfare recipients was questioned. Were attitudes to welfare payments - a specific political issue - driving wider attitudes to poverty? The “get tough” approach taken by both politicians and the media to welfare dependency could well influence public opinion.
- There was caution about promoting policies to tackle inequality based on people’s views about who deserved what. People’s desert did not necessarily relate only to paid work. A range of activities, including caring, studying, and volunteering were recognised as deserving contributions to society. There could be a more positive way to describe people’s participation in comparison to the current language of conditionality and policing people not in work. For example instead of lone parents with caring roles being on a needs-based benefit called Income Support they should be on a benefit which rewarded them explicitly for socially valued caring. Reward for participation created a different set relationship from means tested benefits.
- There was general support for the view that evidence plays an important part in changing people’s reactions to policy suggestions. Given that people had limited confidence in what the government says, it was suggested that organisations with greater credibility in providing evidence, for example NGOs and academics, might play a larger role.

- In the face of unconscious prejudice, contact with people who were different was important in challenging negative stereotypes. There was a place for both human stories and data and statistics, but for some people human stories spoke loudest.
- The relationship between equality, fairness and diversity was discussed. One view was that they should be disconnected because inequality relates to an objective standard, whereas fairness was an essentially subjective notion. Diversity should not be seen as a 'watered down' version of equality; it was about organisations and cultures working more effectively and respecting individuals and their worth. Another view was that diversity was valuable, but was optional. The benefits of diversity needed to be sold.
- The role of equality duties requiring public bodies to move from basic compliance to a fuller engagement was discussed. Transparency and a clear legal framework were essential. It was noted that in Northern Ireland the requirement on employers to produce data about the profile of the workforce had an important impact.
- Strong empathy with the needs of carers was noted. This was true across the political spectrum. There was acceptance of the idea that, if you had been engaged in caring responsibilities all your life, you deserved the same pension as someone working all their life.
- Discriminatory gender attitudes, particularly about low paid work were noted. Some male members of the research focus groups seemed less worried about women in low paid jobs than men.
- The impact of self-reinforcing stereotypes on the educational attainment of black boys was discussed. The expectations of society, employers and others could become self fulfilling for a target group, leading them to conclude 'I don't deserve to get a job'. However research suggested that the disparities could not be explained by this alone. Black children started primary school on an equal basis to other children but were significantly behind by the time they left.
- It was noted that the research had not included transgender, an area of widespread prejudice and stereotypes.
- The role of the media was discussed. Some parts of the media reinforce stereotypes rather than challenging them but stories of injustice could resonate with readers and stir them, and could sell newspapers.

In conclusion Sarah Spencer identified eight important topics:

- 1 Academic research and ensuring that its findings reached the media;
- 2 Disseminating more factual information about the reality of inequality;
- 3 Encouraging social contact as a way of challenging stereotypes;
- 4 Greater transparency about who gets and who gives what;
- 5 Legislation that leads to changes in the behaviour of institutions;
- 6 Changing the messages, not least so that they relate to people's every day concerns; schools and education as a forum for changing perceptions;
- 7 Reform of the benefit system so that it was clearer that people were contributing; and
- 8 Changing government rhetoric.

Seminar 2. Visions of the future: polity, economy and inequality

Tuesday 1 December 2009 at the Royal Institute of British Architects, London W1

Agenda

The seminar was chaired by Beatrix Campbell, writer and broadcaster. With a general election due to take place within 6 months there were three speakers from groups aligned respectively with a Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative outlook:

- Neal Lawson, Chair of Compass
- Alasdair Murray, Director of Centre Forum
- Jonty Olliff-Cooper, Head of Demos' Progressive Conservatism Project

Plenary discussion followed.

Beatrix Campbell questioned whether the present was a time of opportunity or an opportunity lost. The notion of “equality”, like the notion of “capitalism”, had been largely absent for many years from mainstream political debate. Was now the time to think afresh about equality? Was it an experience which was lived by some people but yet to acquire a language and a place in the political agenda? What resources and effort were needed to constitute equality as something which must have a place in political life, something that had to be addressed?

Neal Lawson, Chair of Compass

Neal opened by reflecting on the past 15 years. In the 90s Labour's preoccupation was to win, because after four electoral defeats that was the essential first step. But one easily forgot why one wanted to win. Only some time after the 1997 election was there a reconnection with the central aim in seeking power: a more equal society. An important influence was a book by an Italian political theorist, Norberto Bobbio: *'Left and right'*¹⁹. The book's message was that there is a historic and permanent central distinction between left and right around whether society should be more or less equal.

Bobbio's book argued that in an age of abundance in Europe compared to other parts of the world and compared with the past, notions of inequality were relative. Poverty was not an absolute issue: it was a relative concept. The accident of family and circumstance into which one was born constituted a complete lottery. The job of society was to act collectively to ensure that those accidents of birth and chance were ironed out as much as possible. This was not because everyone was the same and therefore equal – clearly there was a wonderful diversity of people – but because everyone should have the opportunity to reach and fulfil their maximum potential regardless of how quick, slow, beautiful, rich or poor their parents were. There was a moral duty on society to organise itself in a way that gave everyone the opportunity to be everything that they could be.

Neal cited the proposal by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*²⁰ that the aim of public policy should be to flatten out inequality to the point where those at the bottom accepted that redistribution had played its part and the degree of difference in individual circumstance was recognised as reflecting the diversity of society.

To see whether we had reached a turning point in inequality we needed to go back to 1979 when society became incredibly stretched. A well thought-out political process under Margaret Thatcher reversed the 1945-1975 political settlement and redistributed money from the bottom to the top. The international measure of inequality, the Gini coefficient was 0.25 in Britain in 1979. By the time the Conservatives left office in 1997, it was 0.33 the most extreme amongst the countries of the developed world.

Everyone had a capacity to be individualistic, selfish and greedy, or to be compassionate, cooperative and caring. 18 years of Conservatism built brilliantly on the individualist dimension.

New Labour did not come into office in 1997 with the determination to apply equal brilliance to reversing the trend and building on the compassionate and social dimensions. New Labour retained the free market paradigm, but wanted to humanise it. It did that to the best of its ability but it lived a contradiction. Redistribution was impossible within the context of free market ideology. Economic efficiency was always the route to the rich getting richer. Quite large numbers of people were taken out of poverty under Labour while there was growth. But at a time of a strong economy, strong majorities in government and weak

opposition all the Government did was to slow slightly the tide of growing inequality.

The central judgement of the success of a Labour Government was whether it left the country more or less equal. It would leave the country (if it leaves) less equal than it found it, after sustained increases of inequality under the Tories.

What would be the prospect for inequality under a Conservative Government? In Neal's view Cameron was now imitating Blair who had imitated Thatcher. There was the public language about a broken society and compassion, but no substance as to what resources the Conservatives would use to fix the broken society. Voluntary and community organisations could only do so much. Real progress depended on the resources of the state and society acting collectively. There were doubts over the Conservatives' commitment to addressing inequality in practice. Public statements in response to the recession fuelled those doubts.

If the last 30 years had not been great for advancing equality in society what could make a difference now? There was plenty of evidence on inequality that we could use. We knew that the price we pay for a broken society or a social recession was huge. The case for investing at the front end in prevention as opposed to investing after the event to clear up the mess was compelling.

New Labour had sustained an argument over the last 12 years that we could have Scandinavian levels of welfare support and American levels of taxation. It was becoming clear that that was impossible.

The left had not made the case for equality well in the past. It had been presented as pursuing the politics of envy. That might be unfair, but it resonated with public opinion. In reality equality was a subset of arguments about freedom and liberty. The case for redistributing money was not simply about giving some people more money. Money bought choices and control in individual lives. To live the most fulfilling life possible required the resources to do so. That was the strongest way of arguing the case for greater equality.

The profound questions about the definition of a good society and good life automatically opened up issues about equality, redistribution and resources. Questions about time, work, family life, pressure, consumption and the kind of treadmill we live on were dependent on levels of equality and inequality in society. We knew that we were richer but no happier; we knew that there were high levels of insecurity, anxiety and exhaustion. To get out of recession and have more people with the freedom to live a life of opportunity would require a different set of answers from the past decade.

We had begun to recognise that issues of sustainability, democracy and inequality interact and must form a joint narrative. Notions of utopia must be reintroduced into political discourse. Some people who had dared to dream of a world in which individualism, consumerism and wealth held sway had achieved their utopia. It was time to have a vision and plan for a different kind of utopia for all.

Alasdair Murray, Director of CentreForum

Alasdair commented that it could be a unique moment in recent political history, in that all the mainstream parties were committed to reducing inequality and indeed talked about inequality. That was not the case 10 or 20 years ago. In that sense there had been progress.

The recent parliamentary debate on the Government's Equality Bill was significant. Although there were many differences, the fundamental ideas in the Bill on greater equality of opportunity were supported by all sides. There had been more focus in the last few years on both inequality and social mobility. All three parties had commissioned work on why social mobility was in decline. There were some doubts about the figures, but most people agreed that, at least for those at the bottom, things had got worse and people were not escaping poverty in the way that they did a generation or two ago.

Alasdair shared the doubts expressed in the first seminar about the return of the word 'fairness' in political discussion, in place of social mobility and inequality. The Lib Dems had unveiled their tax policy and used the word 'fair' when they could have talked about reducing inequality and increasing equality. Fairness was a more slippery term that tended to mean different things to different people.

Building on Neal's figures on the decline in equality as measured by the Gini coefficient Alasdair compared the UK at 0.36 with the US at 0.4,

one of the highest in the developed world. Sweden, commonly held up as an example of a fair society, is at 0.23, and interestingly Germany, which is not perceived as an especially equal society, is at 0.28, much better than the UK.

The Government was almost certain to miss its child poverty targets. Despite initial success around 2004 and 2005, the Institute of Fiscal Studies estimated that the Government would have to spend £4 billion to meet the target by end 2010, which was hardly possible. On income inequality, the best that could be said was that in the last 5 years Labour had slowed the increase in inequality but had been unable to reverse the trend.

It was not all bad news for income inequality. Low inflation meant that state benefits and tax credits had risen in real terms. Pensioners were marginally better off in real terms than a year ago. There were swings and roundabouts but overall the impact of recession was likely to make things worse rather than better.

In the wake of the recession public spending cuts appeared inevitable. There was a gap between government spending and tax revenue yields of about £95 billion or about 6% of the economy. All the major parties would try to do as much as possible through spending cuts. This would not necessarily have negative implications for equality. For example cancelling Trident would not, unless you were a Trident worker. But cuts to front-line public services would have an impact.

Public spending cuts would take up much of the attention in politics in 2010. Headline targets, such as the child poverty target, to which all three main parties are committed may move down the agenda, not least because they will be missed.

Alasdair suggested three main priorities for reform. His first was tax reform. The Lib Dems proposals to raise personal allowances to help the lowest paid were important. The tax system was still heavily regressive. It should be made progressive, whilst still facing up to the public spending pressures. Some of the tax cuts at the bottom must be balanced by some increases at the top. Given the scale of entrenched wealth inequality, there is scope to move away from income taxes towards wealth taxes that reduce inequality.

Alasdair's second priority was education. The headline figure that a quarter of pupils left school with very low levels of literacy and maths built inequality into life. Proper educational child care, not just ordinary child care, should be available to all as early as possible. A form of deprivation funding such as a pupil premium should follow disadvantaged children through the education system so that schools had an incentive to take all pupils. Smaller class sizes in the early years would help address inequality at the most influential stage. By the age of 15 or 16 it was too late. More diversity in the provision of education, a greater array of ability across all schools and greater freedom for schools to manage their own affairs would all help.

The third priority is public service delivery. The system was excessively centralised. Many inequality problems were entrenched at a local level and only local service providers and local government understood the issues. Devolution of power to service providers and local government would improve services.

Alasdair was cautiously optimistic about the likelihood of good policies under the next government, whoever it might be. The gains of the last ten years would not all be rolled back. However, the forces of inequality unleashed by globalisation were not going to recede.

Jonty Olliff-Cooper, Head of Demos' Progressive Conservatism Project

Jonty spoke from the perspective of "progressive conservatism" with a small 'p' and a small 'c'.

Inequality did not just mean income inequality. Other types of inequality included:

1. Inequality of wealth and assets, which had seen the biggest gaps open up in the last 15 years, in particular, the gap between those in the middle and at the bottom.
2. Inequality of power – the extent to which you had control over your own life.
3. Inequality of capability – the capacity to capitalise on the opportunities that were presented to you. In the nineteenth century, the attitude was that people were poor because they were lazy. In the

twentieth century, it was that they were poor because of their social circumstances. Now, it is a somewhat crude but useful shorthand to say that capability gaps may be caused (in part) by poverty, rather than poverty caused by character weaknesses, a reversal of the nineteenth century view.

4. Inequality of access to networks, culture and aspiration.
5. Inequality over time – the important generational factors and the shifts over the life course.
6. Inequality of access to services – the ability to navigate systems: unscrambling the state in relation to, for example, access to schools, health and housing.

The Progressive Conservatism project at Demos was looking at all these dimensions of inequality. The context for this work included the financial crisis, the ageing of the population, the crisis in funding pensions, trends in obesity and diabetes, the Gleneagles commitments to developing countries and climate change. We needed to look beyond the short-term financial crisis.

Conservatives had always been preoccupied by the size of the state. Progressive Conservatives saw the size of the state as less relevant than its shape and effectiveness. The aim was not to take a badly organised system and make it smaller, but to create an effective state that worked.

What would this mean? It was fundamental that the state was involved boldly and decisively in the first five years of a child's life. Sure Start was important but was not working properly and needed better targeting. Freeing up the curriculum on the lines of the Swedish system would help. Structured preparation classes for people getting married could influence the unequal outcomes for some children.

In terms of inequality of power, conservatives supported decentralisation. Local government was neither local nor government at present because it covered areas made up of 100,000's of people and could not raise its own funds locally. The internet might be used to promote local democracy, not just for voting but for information and to increase the sense of ownership of government.

On inequality of assets, a recent Progressive Conservative paper '*Recapitalising the poor*' argued that the tax and welfare systems should be used to address the asset gap²¹.

Equality of access also needed to be tackled. Jonty cited an estate in Birmingham where support was available but was not used because people did not know about it. One relevant model was the 311 system in New York – a telephone and online resource which people could use to get a wide range of information and support on jobs, benefits etc²².

On income inequality, there was support among Progressive Conservative activists for cutting tax for the poorest. This would build on the work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.²³ Demos have subsequently published a number of papers on equality and fairness²⁴.

Plenary discussion

The discussion included the following points:

- The balance between the discrimination grounds: one view was that gender discrimination was the most ubiquitous and evident category of inequality. Another view was that the evidence gave a disturbing picture of lack of progress on opportunities for disabled people whereas on gender there had been progress.
- There was a fear that the Equality Bill attracted a “soggy” political consensus of support from politicians precisely because it lacked teeth and would not make much difference. The institutions and structures that created and sustained inequalities remained largely unaffected.
- As in the first seminar, there was discussion about the word ‘fairness’ and how ‘fairness’ and ‘equality’ differ. Jonty argued that to make equality politically sellable, it was better to talk about fairness and fair opportunities.
- There was interest in the lessons to be learnt from other European countries and caution about jumping to conclusions about what worked. There was extensive discussion about Sweden as a role model. The increase in immigration there might be leading to a reduction in support for a high level of public spending. Sweden had a

higher foreign born population than the UK: it was more diverse but interestingly had higher levels of trust. The focus was less on colour and more about the type of immigrant and poor integration.

- The widespread tendency to put social and economic inequality and inequality grounded in race, gender, disability etc in different boxes was challenged. In both the voluntary sector and in Government, they were dealt with by different people and in a different framework. One was seen as a legal issue, the other as a public policy issue. The report by Professor John Hills and the National Equality Panel (NEP) might create a framework for bringing these areas of inequality work together.
- In discussion about Conservative policies it was suggested that there would be a strong focus on social bonds and structures. There were parallels with the Disraelian Conservatives in the later 19th century, a concern with charity, localism, and social housing. The vision might be a society which did not try to delegate social goals to the state: you try and fix them yourself. The Conservatives' main route in tackling inequality might not be through redistribution, especially as schools policy was a powerful route to promoting equality. Generational and geographical inequality was an important dimension, especially the position of the overheated South-east. Development of high speed rail could contribute to a more equal society.
- It was argued that it was too early to tell whether the financial crisis would prove to be a turning point. The last economic crisis in 1929 did not turn into something progressive until 1945: it was the 1939-45 war and public spending in industry and infrastructure during that war that turned the economy round.
- Repeal of the Human Rights Act was seen as a real danger if the Conservatives won office. It challenged the Conservatives' commitment to fairness and social justice. Jonty argued that the equality lobby had done a poor job of marketing human rights and had managed to make human rights seem like a bad thing.
- Conservative opposition to electoral reform was noted because reform could make a major contribution to political equality. Proportional representation (PR) would open up opportunities for a range of other voices.

- Models addressing cooperatives, mutualism and localism were discussed. The role of the Women's Institute had generated strong opinions. In fact it was often radical but misunderstood because it was rural and female. It played an important role consolidating social networks.
- The negative effect of short-term thinking was discussed. Equality was a long term issue: it was argued that the civil service should be one of the forces that enabled government to sustain their long-term plans. Another view was that there was long-term political thinking but it often did not get implemented because of the pressure of short term issues.

Biographies (abridged) of chairs, speakers and panellists

Beatrix Campbell, writer and broadcaster

Beatrix Campbell is a writer, broadcaster and campaigner. Her latest book is *'Agreement! The State, Conflict and Change in Northern Ireland'* and she is currently working on a new book on gender issues. She is a Green Party candidate.

Deirdre Golden, Director Global Equality Diversity and Inclusion Practice, ORC Worldwide

Deirdre Golden is Director of ORC's Global Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Practice. Deirdre is an experienced HR and diversity professional, working with employers in the private and public sectors in the UK and Europe on the diversity and inclusion agenda. She is co-chair of ORC's Global Diversity Forum.

Patrice Hall, Vice-President, ORC Worldwide

Patrice Hall is Vice-president and leader of ORC Worldwide's Global Equality, Diversity and Inclusion practice. She advises organisations globally in both the public and private sectors on successful and sustainable organisational change. Patrice joined ORC after a 21 year career at JPMorgan Chase where she headed the firm's diversity efforts and served in senior roles in the retail division.

Dr Zubaida Haque, Project Director for Equality and Social Cohesion, Commission on 2020 Public Services

Zubaida is a Project Director for the Commission on 2020 Public Services reviewing the potential impact of public service reform on equality and social cohesion. She has worked for Government (DfES, Home Office, DCLG and DTI) and for the inquiries into the disturbances in the Northern England in 2001 (Oldham Independent Review; Cattle Review and Community Cohesion Review Team). She has research and policy-making experience in education, employment, housing, equality, community cohesion and immigration issues and with Muslim communities, working with a wide range of partner organisations.

Tim Horton, Research Director, Fabian Society

Tim Horton is Research Director of the Fabian Society. His current work includes a project, *Fighting Poverty and Inequality in an Age of Affluence*, looking at the future of welfare and poverty prevention in

Britain. He is co-author of *'Facing Out: How Party Politics Must Change to Build a Progressive Society'* (Fabian Society, 2007). He has worked on economic and welfare policy in the Labour Party Policy Unit and as a Special Adviser at the Department of Trade and Industry, and before that was a policy analyst in HM Treasury's Enterprise and Growth Unit. He has a doctorate from the University of Cambridge in music and psychology.

Neal Lawson, Chair of Compass

Neal Lawson is Chair of the centre-left pressure group Compass, whose goal is a more equal and democratic world. He writes regularly for the Guardian and the New Statesman and appears on TV and radio as a political commentator. He is Contributing Editor of the social democracy policy journal Renewal. He is an Associate of the think tank Demos, on the Board of Centre Forum and a Research Fellow at the Global Policy Institute at London Met University. He was formerly an adviser to Gordon Brown and a trade union researcher. He has worked as a public affairs consultant and ran his own company. In July 2009 he published *'All Consuming: how shopping got us into this mess and how we can find our way out'* (Penguin).

Bronwyn McKenna, Director of Organising and Membership, UNISON

Bronwyn McKenna is Director of Organising and Membership at UNISON. She is a solicitor specialising in employment and discrimination law. She is a member of the Central Arbitration Committee, the Employment Law Committee of the Law Society and of the Legislative and Policy Committee of the Employment Lawyers Association. Since 2007, Bronwyn has been a member of the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council and represents the Council on the Tribunal Procedure Committee.

Sarah Spencer CBE, Chair of the Equality and Diversity Forum

Sarah was a founder member of the Equality and Diversity Forum in 2002 and is Deputy Director at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. She is also a Visiting Professor at the Human Rights Centre, University of Essex. Sarah was formerly Deputy Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality and chaired its Public Policy and Public Sector Committee, overseeing its inquiry into site provision for Gypsies and Travellers. Sarah was General Secretary of the National Council for Civil Liberties (Liberty) and subsequently Director of the Citizenship and Governance Programme at

the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). She has published widely on equality, human rights and migration issues.

Alasdair Murray, Director of CentreForum

Alasdair Murray is director of Centre Forum, the liberal think tank. He writes and comments widely on the UK policy debate but particularly the economy, social mobility, migration and demographic change. He was previously deputy director at the Centre for European Reform and an economics and Brussels correspondent at The Times.

Jonty Olliff-Cooper, Progressive Conservatism Project at Demos

Jonty leads the Progressive Conservatism Project at Demos. Jonty's work focuses on community, childhood, welfare reform and public service innovation. Before joining Demos, Jonty was an adviser to the Conservative Party's Policy Unit, where he led on innovation policy, family and public service reform. Jonty began his career in the private sector as a strategy consultant at the Boston Consulting Group. Since leaving consulting he has spent a short spell at the Pan-Africa Strategy team of the Department of International Development and most recently in teaching.

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About the Equality and Diversity Forum

The Equality and Diversity Forum (EDF) is a network of national organisations committed to equal opportunities, social justice, good community relations, respect for human rights and an end to discrimination based on age, disability, gender and gender identity, race, religion or belief, and sexual orientation.

For further information about EDF or to subscribe to EDF's free electronic newsletter, visit www.edf.org.uk.

About ORC Worldwide

ORC Worldwide's Global Equality, Diversity and Inclusion practice was founded in the early 1960s in the United States, and then in the UK, it has since expanded to work with employers in the global environment. The practice works with private and public sector employers as well as INGO's addressing the equality and diversity agenda in employment, and has longstanding ties with government and regulatory agencies in the European Union and Washington, D.C.

For further information visit <https://www.orcnetworks.com/>

About the Equality and Human Rights Commission

The job of the Equality and Human Rights Commission is to promote equality and human rights, and to create a fairer Britain. It does this by providing advice and guidance, working to implement an effective legislative framework and raising awareness of rights. For further information visit www.equalityhumanrights.com/

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