

Spectacle and reality: inequality in the second Elizabethan age

John Holmwood looks at changing income inequality and welfare institutions during the Queen's 60 year reign. While the Jubilee celebrations were a spectacle of unity, the truth is that inequality has been dramatically on the increase in Britain during the second part of the monarch's reign. The public institutions inaugurated during the first half of the reign have been dismantled and marketised in the second half, contributing to the growing wedge between the haves and have-nots.



Just a week after the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, the Cumberland Lodge organised a [conference](#) on *Living in Squeezed Britain: Attitudes to Wealth and Economic Inequality in the New Age of Austerity*. At the celebrations, the nation was encouraged to think of itself as united, represented by a monarch whose service throughout her reign was a symbol of stability in a changing and challenging world.

In many of the commentaries, these changes had the quality of external events over which we had little control, but, at the same time, other institutions had shown themselves to be flawed, with politicians on the make in the aftermath of their expenses scandal and the media over-concerned with celebrity. The Jubilee concert provided a nice illustration of this contrast; of celebrity performance and the monarch's reserve, of images projected onto the façade of Buckingham Palace and the solid substance of the building itself.

But the display of unity – real though it may have been – is likely to have little of lasting significance. The last 60 years can be divided into two phases, beginning and ending with austerity. The Queen's coronation was delayed by one year because the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was wary of an extravagant display at a time of post-war austerity and recovery. Yet, the first half of the Queen's reign was characterised by a period of institution building – of the National Health Service, public education, of the BBC as a world-significant TV and radio broadcaster, of the Arts Council, National Theatre, and other organisations. At the same time, social inequalities were being reduced, such that by the time of the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 the range of inequalities was at the narrowest it was to be at any point in her reign.

The latter part of her reign has been accompanied by widening inequalities. A general increase in prosperity has been disproportionately appropriated. As noted in an [Institute for Fiscal Studies Briefing](#), up to 1977 "income inequality had been on a long-term downward trend, a trend which, as it happens, turned around towards the end of the 1970s. The 1980s saw a historically unprecedented increase in inequality – an increase which has not been unwound since, despite the very substantial growth in the benefit and tax credit budget in the 2000s."

At the same time, the public institutions inaugurated during the first half of the reign have been dismantled and marketised in the second half. In all of these changes, the Queen has not simply presided as a steadying influence while external storms have buffeted the ship of state. The changes are the product of government policy and have been introduced in each Queen's speech at the start of parliamentary sessions. If there is a lack of confidence in public institutions, it is no large part to do with a legislative attack upon them, opening them to competition and making them available for profit without protection of their public functions, as is now happening in higher education and the National Health Service. The first part of the reign coincided with the dismantling of Empire and the emergence of a 'postcolonial' Britain and Commonwealth. Yet, the unity now being called up seems also to be problematic, just in so far as the government can propose the (unnecessary) criminalisation of forced marriage as part of the government's attack on multiculturalism.

As we enter a new era of austerity, the prospects are for a further accentuation of inequality. An [earlier briefing](#) by IFS, showed that far from ‘everyone being in it together’, the government’s spending plans were regressive and the burden would fall mainly on the poor. Yet the well-off, and those responsible for the financial crisis emerge unscathed and active lobbyists for the protection of their advantages.

We may ask if the present economic crisis and the prospects of low economic growth presage new social tensions and a politics of resentment. In 1931 Tawney began his book, *Equality*, with Mathew Arnold’s observation that “in England inequality is almost a religion” (1964: 33). Its liturgy is expression of faith in the market. Is it not time for faith in a properly inclusive public and political leadership toward creating it? In this context, the emergence of the ‘Occupy’ movement is symbolically more significant than demonstrations of support for the monarchy.

The ‘Occupy’ movement is a call to occupy public spaces for the purposes of dialogue. In this respect, it is the antithesis of the market; the latter is anti-dialogical that it is the aggregation of the private decisions of individuals. If we evacuate our public spaces for dialogue and replace them with the market, the consequence will be a further increase in social anomie. If these problems are disregarded, it will be a consequence of the separation of political elites from the communities they claim to represent and of the resentment of those better off at being asked to recognise their obligations to others. Unity is an empty call, without practical policies that address the record levels of social inequality that threaten to be the lasting monument of the second Elizabethan age, cancelling the achievements of the first decades.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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