

Political Thinking Meeting Report No 20

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 20 Monday 16th Apr 2018

Topic: "Inequality"

Question "Given the continuing and seemingly unstoppable increase in Inequality in the UK, why has there not been a revolution?"

Summary

There was broad agreement that inequality as generally perceived had been increasing in the UK in recent years and continues to increase; relying on several academic studies with this conclusion. This was considered to be at best socially divisive, but unlikely to lead to Revolution given the long tradition of peaceable evolution of political systems in the UK. Most current policies with the objective of reducing inequalities were broadly supported. There was no consensus on new policies that might be more effective in reversing the trend towards increasing inequality and a reluctant acceptance that the current trends might lead to considerable social disharmony, including anti-social behaviours, increasing property crimes and possibly violence.

Discussion.

Many forms of inequality were identified; not only in respect of income and wealth, but also in personal characteristics such as intelligence, sporting abilities, musical and artistic ability, personality traits such as perseverance and sociability, and others. Inequalities occur not only in the possession of such gifts, but also in their absence, exemplified by handicaps or disabilities where normal skills are absent. Life chances are affected by the absence of normal capabilities as well by the possession of unusual or exceptional skills. So considerable inequalities of many different kinds are part of the human condition.

A civilised society should support the development of all skills and talents, including exceptional ones; a process which may take considerable personal dedication and perseverance to attain high levels. It should also compensate or redress to some extent where practical where normal

skills are lacking, or some abnormal handicap is present. So that all should be able to develop whatever talents they have to some appropriate level. Both the individual and society benefit from this possibility and opportunity of development.

Disparity of reward was seen as a major source of disharmony. Disproportionately high incomes were considered to be unfair, as not always nor indeed often justified by merit or ability. Members cited examples from their workplaces where perceived inequalities of reward in relation to effort or merit had a demoralising effect on those not in receipt of such rewards. The suggestion that inequalities must be available so as to incentivise those with high abilities to make the effort to use them was not accepted; the perverse effect on those excluded from exceptional rewards was seen as detrimental to social health. Effective and productive teams at work were characterised by perceived fairness of reward; differences there must be, but fair differences. It is interesting that members personal and quoted experiences were broadly in line with the recent academic studies in this area. The “bonus” culture has been introduced into many workplaces, public and private, on the basis that the possibility of “extra” incentivises the individual towards higher productivity. In fact this may have a perverse effect on group productivity by disincentivising the group and devaluing group attitudes.

Members broadly accepted that inequalities of reward, visibly from inability to find work and poor housing as a consequence contributed to increases in social problems. Rates of petty crime, drug use, minor violence, property theft were all indicators of this kind.

Some problems seemed particularly intractable. Inequalities between the generations in the UK in respect of housing is one such; the possibility of home ownership for the younger is receding with no political solution. Might this lead to some sort of anti-social political behaviour, if not actual revolution? Internationally the problem of international mass migration on economic grounds from poor countries to the rich is essentially a consequence of perceived inequality. There is no political solution in sight, and the consequences for the would-be migrants continue to be severe.

Inequality is indeed a cause of some political problems; but there may not be a political solution.