
VIEWPOINT

Inequalities in Britain 1997–2006: the Dream that Turned Pear-shaped

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For international readers, I'm afraid (as the English tend to say) that this is a very British tale beginning with a very British piece of slang, so I had better define at least one of my terms:

Pear-shaped (noun) . . .

The third meaning is mostly limited to the United Kingdom. It is used to describe a situation that went awry, perhaps horribly wrong. A failed bank robbery, for example, could be said to have 'gone pear-shaped'.

The phrase seems to visualise the original plan as a perfect circle, but for some reason, this became distorted in the execution. Hence the outcome was more pear-shaped.

The origin for this use of the term is in dispute . . .

(Source: <http://www.answers.com/topic/pear-shaped>)

The dream, the perfect-policy-circle that was going to deliver so much was fully recognised to be pear-shaped only in the tenth year of its dreaming. The dream was that inequalities would be reduced by a government committed to social justice. This included all kinds of inequalities, but it makes sense in this journal to begin with those concerning economic geography:

On the 20 March 2006 the *Financial Times* published the results of its investigation which

. . .uncovered a startling picture of underperformance in the very regions of the country the government came to office vowing to revitalise. The stark message of the statistics is that regional and local economies under Mr Blair's government have become divergent more quickly than under Margaret

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Thatcher, generally seen as the premier whose policies did most to entrench the north-south divide. (Giles, 2006)

The growing divide they found was not just between regions of the country but 'at the level of parts of UK cities and small rural areas... the richest areas benefited from faster growth since 1997 than poorer areas' (Giles, 2006). The newspaper quoted Professor Andrew Henley of Swansea University as saying that it was 'shocking, really' and that 'we have had more dispersion between 1995 and 2001 than between 1977 and 1995', and that developments since 1997 are pointing towards the growth of 'extremely productive breakaway regions including London, the South-East and a few cities elsewhere, a few intermediate areas – and a big rump of poor performance'. In short, a pear-shaped picture of economic development was emerging in Britain, where the bulk of the population were destined to live in an underperforming bulge of regions from which the 'productive' winners are moving further and further away. Where, though, are these winners and losing places and peoples? Which are the 'few cities elsewhere' and what do they have that the rest lack to beat the bulge?

In work towards helping to produce the statistics for the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's 'State of the Cities Report' (Parkinson *et al.*, 2006), with colleagues in the Social and Spatial Inequalities Group (SASI, 2006) at Sheffield University, we produced a very simple league table. A version of the table is reproduced here sorted by which cities have risen fastest to slowest in the league since around the year 1997. The average score for a city is simply the normalised average of five measures of well being: life expectancy, education (percentage with university degrees), low worklessness (reflected in low Job Seeker's Allowance/Income Support claim rates), low poverty (using the Poverty and Social Exclusion measure) and average house prices. The score is expressed in units akin to life expectancy and is now highest for Cambridge, at 82.3, and lowest for Liverpool at 64.7. The cities we compare are the largest as defined by their built-up area in England. Note Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not included here. Despite this omission, it is evident from Table 1 and by just looking within England that those cities where chances have improved the most have been mainly in the south. To aid interpretation, the table is shaded by whether each city is in the north or the south of this country. The north is darker.

In describing the playing field that was formed as a result of long term social trends that have, in the main, been exacerbated since 1997, we suggested that English cities can appear in a series of leagues when the data in Table 1 is sorted by the rate of change. A 'premier league' of four cities with high average scores from 80.9 to 82.3 is clear (including Oxford and Cambridge), followed by 18 'first division cities' with scores from 74.2 to 79.8 (from Crawley to Chatham, including London and Bristol). There is a gap and then a 'second division' of 14 cities scoring between 71.6 and 73.6 (from Preston to Huddersfield, including Leeds and Nottingham),

Table 1. Key state of the city indicators, sorted by change and an overall score measure given

City	Life Exp. 2001–2003	2001 % of adults with a degree	% working age claiming JSA/IS	2003 PSE	Poverty by 1999–2001 (%)	Average housing price 2003 (£)	Average score 2003	Change in score over time
Brighton	78.4	29	9.3	27	212361	77.6	6.8	
Oxford	79.2	37	6.1	30	255181	80.9	6.7	
London	78.6	30	10.3	33	283387	77.5	6.7	
Cambridge	79.5	41	5.1	29	244862	82.3	5.6	
York	79.4	23	5.4	25	147513	78.2	5.4	
Reading	79.6	26	4.7	20	211794	81.5	5.3	
Bournemouth	79.7	17	7.1	21	214296	79.1	5.0	
Southampton	78.8	19	6.9	25	172585	76.9	4.9	
Crawley	79.6	19	4.8	22	205506	79.8	4.7	
Aldershot	79.0	22	3.7	17	238991	81.9	4.6	
Bristol	78.9	23	7.7	25	160708	77.1	4.6	
Warrington	77.9	17	6.8	23	119668	75.1	4.6	
Southend	79.0	13	7.5	19	186481	77.6	4.2	
Milton Keynes	78.2	18	6.6	25	161625	76.0	4.2	
Derby	78.1	18	10.5	27	114280	73.1	4.2	
Worthing	78.8	16	6.4	20	186992	78.0	4.1	
Swindon	78.2	15	6.6	22	150689	76.0	4.1	
Northampton	78.2	17	7.8	24	135871	75.1	4.1	
Newcastle	77.1	16	12.8	34	111220	69.2	4.1	
Portsmouth	78.8	16	6.6	25	157145	76.2	4.0	
Norwich	79.8	18	7.5	27	138187	76.3	3.9	
Coventry*	77.8	16	10.9	28	111165	72.0	3.8	
Hastings	77.4	15	13.4	25	163128	72.3	3.7	
Preston	77.7	17	7.2	26	97038	73.6	3.6	
Manchester	76.7	19	11.6	30	119569	70.9	3.6	
Sheffield	77.9	16	10.4	33	96328	70.8	3.6	
Ipswich	79.0	16	10.1	25	134514	74.7	3.5	
Plymouth	78.1	13	9.8	28	118978	72.4	3.5	

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

City	Life Exp. 2001-2003	2001 % of adults with a degree	% working age claiming JSA/IS 2003	PSE 1999-2001 (%)	Poverty by 1999-2001 (%)	Average housing price 2003 (£)	Average score 2003	Change in score over time
Wakefield	77.5	14	9	28	110407	72.1	3.5	
Gloucester	78.4	16	8.5	22	141690	75.5	3.4	
Nottingham	77.5	18	9.8	28	123663	72.7	3.4	
Birkenhead	77.9	13	12.2	29	95632	70.6	3.3	
Sunderland	76.6	12	12.4	34	91322	67.8	3.2	
Leeds	78.2	19	8.9	32	119262	72.8	3.1	
Middlesbrough	77.1	12	13.1	32	81760	68.4	3.1	
Doncaster	77.3	11	10.6	30	82267	69.8	3.0	
Barnsley	77.2	10	10.8	32	79492	68.9	3.0	
Telford	77.9	13	9	27	115722	72.6	2.9	
Chatham	77.7	12	7.7	23	142374	74.2	2.8	
Liverpool	75.7	14	18	36	87607	64.7	2.8	
Wigan	76.5	12	8.6	27	88946	70.7	2.6	
Grimsby	77.6	10	11.5	28	77898	70.0	2.6	
Rochdale	76.4	14	12.2	31	92523	68.8	2.5	
Leicester	78.0	17	11	28	124812	72.6	2.3	
Bolton	76.8	15	10.4	29	89281	70.4	2.3	
Blackpool	77.2	13	8.9	24	103656	72.5	2.2	
Birmingham	77.4	14	12.8	33	122794	69.7	2.2	
Peterborough	77.5	14	9.5	28	123089	72.1	2.1	
Luton	77.2	14	9.7	28	143698	72.2	2.0	
Mansfield	77.1	9	9.4	28	94749	70.4	2.0	
Blackburn	75.8	14	12.7	30	70969	67.8	1.9	
Huddersfield	77.2	15	8.7	29	97815	71.6	1.8	
Stoke	76.9	11	10.3	29	78834	69.7	1.7	
Burnley	76.8	12	10.7	31	55879	68.7	1.5	
Bradford	76.9	13	11.5	33	75919	68.6	1.4	
Hull	76.6	12	17.1	33	72374	66.0	1.4	

*Yes Coventry is in the north of England (just).

followed by a 'third division' from 70.9 to 70.4 (headed by Manchester and down to Bolton), and a 'fourth division' (from Grimsby to Middlesbrough, including Birmingham, and Newcastle). Blackburn, Sunderland, Hull and Liverpool are below division four. Almost all Southern cities are in the premier league or first division of Table 1. Less than a half dozen are found in the second division and none below that. Division two downwards is dominated by cities in the North of England. Changes since 1997 have exacerbated inequalities in the life chances between these cities. This is seen before we even consider that, in general, the life chances gains have also been greater outside of the built-up areas of these cities – in their commuting hinterlands (especially the hinterlands of the more southern cities).

Brighton, Oxford and Cambridge are the star performers, matching the growth of London. In the north, only York stands out as comparable. York is, in a way, becoming a southern enclave in the north of England – again. (A millennia ago, when William the Conqueror marched north he was handed the keys to the city of York on his arrival, he built two castles, and made the city his base for conquering the rest of the north of England.) There are very deep historical roots as to why some places find themselves a little higher or lower on the league than they might otherwise be placed. After York, growth in the round has been fastest in Reading, Bournemouth, Southampton, Crawley, Aldershot and Bristol – all cities with relatively quick connections to London (which is also part of York's advantage, being on the East coast mainline).

However, there is really only one star economic performing city in Britain – London. It just happens to have people commuting to it, or dependent on it, from a range of nearby towns and cities, which means that those areas often rank highly too. Figure 1 is thus possibly as good a guide as anything to future economic prospects over the short term in Britain. Note that in the south there are towns like Hastings that do a little bit worse than might be expected, even after accounting for their slightly slower commuting times.

The Government – at least that large part that does not believe its own spin (Dorling *et al.*, 2002) – knows this is happening. The party of government knows it even better, being based and strongest in those very areas where people are losing out the most relative to others. Most Cabinet Ministers know that their constituents are losing out compared with the norm (let alone compared with the best-off). So how does the Government cope with this reality, especially in the run-up to the tenth anniversary of the 1997 landslide? One way is to convince themselves that the present would have been far more unequal had the landslide and the policies that could be implemented as a result of it not occurred. That is very possible, but it becomes a weaker defence to use as more time passes. Saying that at least nowhere appears to have fared absolutely worse (on balance if not in every instance) under your watch is no great claim to achievement – even if under other circumstances immiseration might have been more absolute than relative. Another way that government can cope with their failure is to

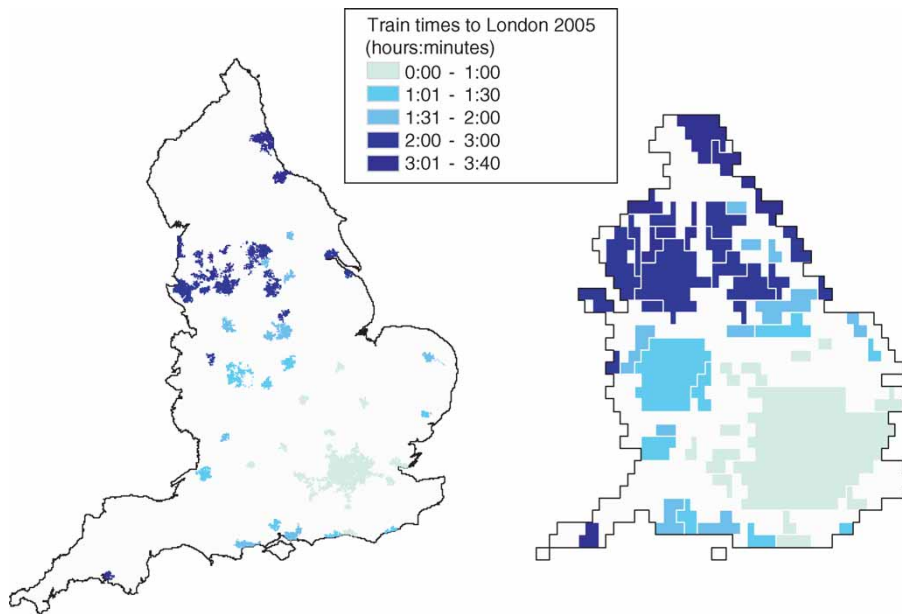


Figure 1. Travel time by fastest morning train to the Capital, 2005 (England only, from the largest cities, conventional and population mapped)

blame someone else – and when you run out of other politicians to blame, you can turn to the victims of your policy failure.

Suppose we take the five indicators used to construct the league table above. The first is life expectancy, where the statistics show we are moving away from, rather than approaching or meeting, two main government targets for reducing health inequalities. Firstly, inequalities in infant mortality by class have increased. Thankfully, no-one has yet blamed working class babies for not trying hard enough to live through their first year of life, compared with the efforts of middle-class newborns. Secondly, inequalities in life expectancy between areas have been rising steadily under New Labour (and they pledged to reduce those inequalities too). Here, some parts of government believe folk can be blamed for this trend. Taking a day-off from supporting United States foreign policy on Wednesday 26 July 2006, the Prime Minister travelled to Nottingham to tell the population that ‘we can’t slim for you’. There is a very long history behind the disingenuous turn on public health policy that took Labour from its position in 1997, in which Tessa Jowell, the then Minister for Public Health, criticised the health strategy of the previous administration for ‘its excessive emphasis on lifestyle issues’ which ‘cast the responsibility back on to the individual’ (Jowell, 1997). It took just under ten years to turn around the implied promise to not blame the victim.

Consider next, adults with a degree, and you find that the greatest absolute increases in access to university education have been amongst

those children already most likely to go, and this despite initiatives to widen access. It may well have been worse without those initiatives. The gap in access to universities, let alone the gap in access to which universities, could have grown far wider had there not been a change in government – but that gap widened after 1997 and we have yet to see it narrow (Dorling, 2006). And who is blamed? The universities say it is the secondary schools. The secondary schools blame primary schools, and they in turn the home environment. ‘Sure Start’ (a scheme meant to support, among others, lone parents with very young children) is then supposed to cure all ills there. Meanwhile, the quota on how many children can get to university is set rigidly by the centre. Even if all the children of Britain were to excel above our wildest expectations, the numbers of university places remain fixed, and any mechanism to ensure a fairer distribution of what is available is not working. Attendance of private schools has risen year on year since 1997, mainly to ensure that those whose parents are richer can continue to take most places while the rest are told – sorry, blamed – for not being clever enough. Quite what is clever about having parents who can pay for your pieces of paper by proxy is never fully explained. However, there are many more victims yet to blame, so we must move quickly on.

What is on offer to the two thirds of children for whom places at universities are not reserved? They can work hard for relatively low wages in what since 1997 have come to be called lousy jobs (in which they are lucky to receive a special lower age discriminatory minimum wage), but they have no ‘fifth option’ to be out of work and not work to find work. It was mainly for this younger age group that Job Seeker’s Allowance (JSA) was created – the next column of our table.

When considering JSA/IS (Income Support) benefit recipients, those in areas of highest uptake have been targeted most into low paid work under various initiatives, but, as David Webster explained in an issue of this journal earlier this year, current government policy on worklessness is also predicated on a ‘blame the victim’ approach. The Government is ‘very confident that the problem lies entirely on the supply side of the labour market. In other words it is caused by the characteristics or motivation of workless people and not by any shortage of demand for labour’ (Webster, 2006, 107). Webster shows that it is the shortage of demand for labour that keeps many cities in their places, at the bottom of Table 1, not the fecklessness of those who still live there.

On the fourth column of the table – poverty – there are no signs of a reduction in the overall national level when measured by expenditure (Brewer *et al.*, 2006) or by Breadline methods (Pantazis *et al.*, 2006) and, by 2005, Britain still had the 25th highest level of child poverty (before transfers) out of some 26 other European countries that were recently compared by Eurostat using data from 2005. The only country to perform worse was the Slovak Republic (Hirsch, 2006, 16). A great deal of boasting is done by government over having not quite hit the first (and easiest) of the four targets on the way to abolishing child poverty. Again, things could be

far worse, and again, just as with dying infants, government does not yet blame the children. It is also true that, over this same time period, in the United States there have been absolute increases in infant mortality, led by increases in the number of Black American babies dying due to rising absolute poverty levels. However, comparing ourselves to another 25 countries in Europe, as Hirsch did, and we are still doing very badly, especially considering we are amongst the richest of European countries.

Finally, the indicators in geographical inequalities, our fifth column (trends in housing prices and housing wealth, and wealth when more widely measured), all show rising inequalities since 1997 (Dorling *et al.*, 2005). However, when it comes to wealth inequalities, the victims are being blamed in advance for their future poverty. The truculent young appear not to trust in financial institutions or in the advice of their government:

Millions of workers in their twenties and thirties risk turning into the 'live fast, die poor' generation unless they start saving for retirement, a Labour minister said yesterday. James Purnell, the pension reform minister, said today's affluent young would live longer than their parents but were facing poverty in old age because they were living for today rather than saving for tomorrow. In a bleak assessment, Mr Purnell warned that in the space of just five years the proportion of those in their twenties paying into a private pension had fallen from one in three to one in four. (Wilson and Webster, 2006)

As we in Britain approach the tenth anniversary of this Labour administration, we ought to remember that we were warned at the start that it would be a long haul. The words were ringing in our ears, subliminally entering our thinking. The words were repeated endlessly in the run-up to the election of 1 May 1997. The words, for those readers who were not in Britain during those days were: 'things can only get better if we see it through'.

As victory in 1997 was celebrated the campaign theme tune began with:

You can walk my path, you can wear my shoes
Learn to talk like me and be an angel too
But maybe you ain't never gonna feel this way
You ain't never gonna know me, but I know you
I'm singing it now –
Things can only get better
They can only get better if we see it through –
that means me and I mean you too
So teach me now that things can only get better
They can only get, they only get, take it on from here
You know I know that things can only get better . . .

On 5 May 2005, the third successful election campaign theme tune ended with the words

Touch me
Take me to that other place
Reach me
I know I'm not a hopeless case

What you don't have you don't need it now
What you don't know you can feel it somehow
What you don't have you don't need it now
Don't need it now
Was a beautiful day

Presumably the search is now on for the fourth campaign theme tune. Clearly, any budding lyricist who wishes their words to be used by the new and even more bright and shiny Labour Party in 2008, 2009, or 2010 should be trying to rhyme – ‘you’ve only got yourselves to blame’ with ... ‘peoples’ lives – it’s only a game’.

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