

Truth, Lies and the Spirit Level

Conference at York 31 January 2014

This conference was attended by about 150 people and allowed speakers and participants to consider how the theories advocated in the book *The Spirit Level (1)* that societies work better when inequalities between the earnings of those at the top of society and those at the bottom are reduced. We live in a wealthy nation but one where there are great disparities between those taking home huge incomes and those at the bottom. An economic crisis has led to austerity for some, where the use of food banks has tripled in a year, where “strivers” are pitted against “skivers” and yet we are told that we are all in this together.

Do we have to be like this or are there alternatives?

The speakers at the conference came from a variety of backgrounds:

The chair was the Very Reverend Vivienne Faull, Dean of York.

Dean Faull was a teacher with the Church Mission Society in North India and a youth worker before training for the ministry. Before coming to York she was

Dean at Leicester. Jonathan Bradshaw is a Professor of Social Policy at the Universities of York and Durham.

His main theme was that the cuts in services caused by the need to reduce the Government’s deficit had fallen disproportionately on the poor and wealthy people have not made an appropriate contribution nor had they been required to make significant increases in taxation. He developed the argument that cuts had been loaded on poor families with children. He made the case that children had been hit harder than the elderly. Using statistics he showed that there had been an increase in suicides by young people.

His contribution was less clear about the causes of the banking crisis in 2008 and the need to deal with the financial deficit that ensued.

Paul Morrison is a policy adviser to the Methodist Church.

He specialises on topics around poverty and economic issues. He has worked on the implementation of a Living Wage throughout the British Methodist Church. His work has led him to question and rebut myths about the poor and disadvantaged that are perpetrated by sections of the popular press, such as the poor are lazy and don’t wish to work. Many of the poor are in work but find it a struggle to make ends meet.

Other myths such as the poor caused the deficit and the poor don’t manage their money properly were challenged.

Dr. Paul Edmondson –Jones is the Director of Public Health and Well-being, City of York Council.

Dr. Edmondson-Jones contribution differed from other speakers in that he was dealing with the effects of poverty in York which by most measures is an affluent city. With an unemployment rate of 1.7% many would assume there was little problem. There are however pockets of deprivation outlined by statistical analysis. For instance the least well off 20% of males have a lower than expected life

expectancy and the gap between top earners and others in the city has been increasing over the years. Factors show women are bearing a greater burden of austerity.

Current thinking in York includes:

- Supporting a Living Wage rather than simply a Minimum Wage
- Improve the use of health services by poorer people
- Listen more to how poorer people see their situation being improved.

Kate Pickett Professor of Epidemiology in the Department of Health Sciences at University of York

Professor Pickett is the co-author of *The Spirit Level* and she defended vigorously its academic validity in the face of criticism some of it vitriolic in the press and political circles. The book has been translated into 23 languages. She said that between 1945 and 1970 the level of inequality in the developed world had been much lower than the period from 1970 to date.

Analysis of differences within regions of countries could also be indicative of ill ease in a society.

Conclusion

I think there was a general acceptance of the theories propounded by *The Spirit Level* but practical steps to help were more difficult. There was support for progressive taxation as one way to reduce inequalities but more than that, taxation allows us to educate children, to fund the NHS, to provide for the unemployed and the disabled and care for the environment etc. etc. Equitable taxation should be seen as a social good and not as a necessary evil. There was support for a Living Wage as a small step towards reducing differentials between the wealthy and others and as a way of taking some working people from being dependent on welfare. On a personal level I was impressed by the work being done in York by the City Council to seek out and help those at the lower end of the income spectrum.

1. Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, 2009, *The Spirit Level, why equality is better for everyone*, Penguin London.

John Cope Keighley Quaker Meeting