Inequalities and elections
(with reference to Robert Burns)

I admit it … I’m a Burnsaholic.

I can weep when I hear the last verse of
‘A man’s a man for a’ that’… in fact, I did
once weep when a friend and I recited it at
a Polish and Scottish Burns gathering.

‘Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a’ that;
That sense and worth, o’er a’ the earth,
May bear the gree, and a’ that.
For a’ that and a’ that,
It’s coming yet, for a’ that,
That man to man the world o’er
Shall brothers be for a’ that.’

The whisky may have been laced with
vodka and singing along with the Polish
version of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ may have
been an excessive challenge, but we all
shared the sentiment.

Being raised 3 miles from his birthplace,
Burns Cottage in Ayr (‘wham ne’er a toon
surpasses for honest men and bonnie
lassies’, as I’m particularly fond of
reminding my children and friends),
undoubtedly contributed to the addiction.
Fed a fairly constant diet at school of
Burns poetry and songs with an annual
Burns Night feast of recitation and singing
it was impossible not to absorb the flavour
of it. We were exposed young to the fauna
and flora … mice, (‘To a mouse’), lice (‘To
a louse’) and daisies (‘To a mountain
daisy’). Also to the pain and suffering,
some of which we could identify with (‘To
a toothache’) and some of which seemed
more abstract (‘My heart’s in the
Highlands’). Love was a constant
appealing theme and the original
uncensored versions of certain love
poems were those sought after in the
school playground. The virtues of plain
fare which tended to be preached in the
school and the (Sudan 1-free) dinner hall
were echoed in the frequently-chanted
verses of ‘Address to the haggis’.

The concept of social justice and
equality, so often a theme in Burns poetry,
was a regular topic for discussion. As it
will be in the run-up to the general election
with the political parties vying to convince
the electorate that their particular
strategies for addressing poverty and
inequalities are the most effective, or, at
least, the most acceptable. A study just
published by members and associates of
the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion
at the London School of Economics has
surveyed the evidence on the impact of
policies towards poverty, inequality and
social exclusion since the Labour
Government was elected in 1997.1 The
overall conclusion of A more equal
society? is that, although the tide has
turned in key areas of social exclusion,
Britain remains a very unequal society.
Where government has concentrated its
efforts, the study, supported by the
Rowntree Foundation and the Economic
and Social Research Council, suggests
that there is now clear evidence of
progress. Child poverty has been reduced
by its tax and benefit reforms and new
analysis of spending patterns shows that
low-income families with children, who
have benefited most from the reforms,
have increased spending on goods for
children such as clothing, footwear, games
and toys, as well as on food (but their
spending on alcohol and tobacco has not
increased).

But the study argues that there are gaps
in the government’s strategy in other
areas. For instance, the latest available
figures show that poverty among working-
age adults without children has reached
record levels. While some vulnerable
groups have been the target of special
initiatives, others have not. And, in
the case of asylum seekers, government
policies have actively increased social
exclusion, especially in relation to
employment, housing and income. As far
as health is concerned, the report found
that the formula for allocating NHS
resources between areas has become
better tuned to the needs of
disadvantaged communities, but that
other policies have been rather vague or
limited and that there is little evidence yet
from time trends of narrowing gaps
between social groups.

Whatever the facts and figures about
social justice and inequalities, the
electorate wants to be able to trust that
these issues really matter to their potential
representatives. Voters share the yearning
for honesty and loathing of hypocrisy
which are underlying themes in Burns
poetry. In the poem, ‘To a louse’ (‘written
on seeing one on a lady’s bonnet at
church’), Burns purports to berate the
louse for being so impudent as to crawl
’Owre gauze and lace’ but fears that ‘ye
dine but sparely on [sic] a place’. In the
name of encouraging participation in the
political process especially among the
young, perhaps politicians of all hues and
persuasions might usefully adopt the last
verse of the poem as their pre-election
theme …

‘O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad free mony a blunder free us,
And foolish notion:
What airs in dress an’ gait wad lea’e us,
And ev’n devotion!’

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REFERENCE
1. Hills J, Stewart K. A more equal society? New Labour,
poverty, inequality and exclusion. Bristol: Policy Press,
2005.