

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 sparsely 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 oursel's as others see us!
It wad frae 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.