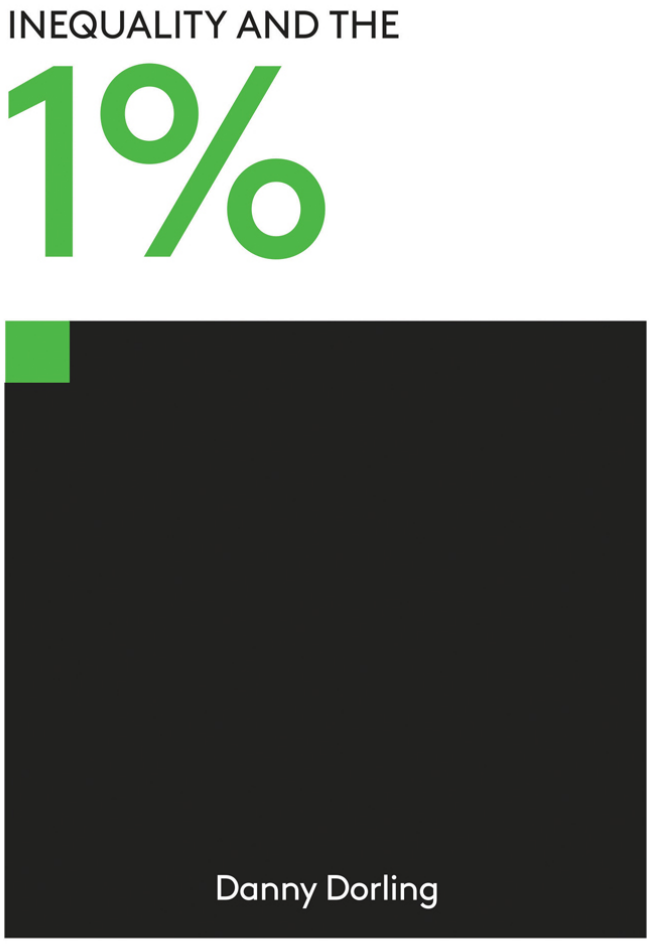
A summary of the conclusions of the book 'Inequality and the 1%' published by Verso in 2015



In 2009, Clive James made a prediction for the coming year. 'Getting rich quick for its own sake', he wrote, 'will look as stupid as bodybuilding does at that point when the neck gets thicker than the head.'[1] Already, the modern obsession with excess wealth 'was gone like the codpiece.' In various of his musings, James had noted that the codpiece did not suddenly go out of fashion. It took time. A small group of men were still strutting around with clothing designed to imply they were endowed with enormous 'manhoods' long after the majority of Tudor

aristocracy had become embarrassed by such stupidity. In the same manner greed tends to reach an apex and then decline. Worldwide greed rose with renewed vigour during our lifetimes, especially in the most unequal countries of the rich world, including the UK.

A couple of days after the 2015 UK general election James received a special award from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts; a year earlier he had been awarded their president's medal. The smooth-tongued prophet of our times has been showered with awards, but it is unlikely he will live to see his prediction come true: the end of fashionable greed. It is still uncertain whether the tide will turn after the 2015 election, or whether future generations will have face an even more rapacious society. None of us know what is about to unfold.

The Conservatives won by a narrow majority in May 2015. The result shocked a London-based commentariat. This was hardly surprising as the capital swung to Labour and London remains where life's winners congregate, a place from which losers must be expelled. It was life's losers who did not turn out to vote for the main alternative on offer, a watered-down version of Conservative austerity being sold to them by Ed Miliband. We were then told the Labour Party did not appeal enough to those who were aspirational and wanted more, including people who wanted more irrespective of who would end up with less. But perhaps fear and fantasy greatly played their part, too. An eighth of the English electorate voted for the UK Independence party (UKIP).

In Scotland greed really did go the way of the codpiece. All but three of the constituencies fell to the Scottish National Party. No longer a nationalist party, the SNP had become a national party. It now represented as wide a cross-section of society as it is possible to imagine. The former Royal Bank of Scotland oil economist Alex Salmond became an MP alongside young students and aged socialists. So fifty-six SNP MPs set off to London to take their seats and spread

their message. Not since 1918, when Sinn Féin took seventy-three seats in Ireland, has a third party performed so well in the United Kingdom. Change is underway, but many of the English elite remain so blindly arrogant they cannot see what's coming. To them the Scots are no better than restless children.

As the impact of the May 2015 election became felt throughout England, new voices were heard and grew louder. They said the Labour Party had stumbled not by choosing the wrong leader or electoral strategy, but because it had forgotten how to cooperate and be kind. Labour did not ally itself with the Greens or the SNP, and there was little unity among its own members in the Shadow Cabinet. Instead, Labour saw the election as a two-horse race where being the sole winner was all important.

One now-hardened commentator, Zoe Williams, explained: 'The problem is so much deeper than who the leader is; and so much more exhilarating.'[2] Labour had not been offering change, just a diluted version of what had gone before. What for some was exhilarating in the days and weeks after 7 May was the opening up of new possibilities and radical alternatives. There were few signs of optimism among the population at large, but for some there were at least glimmerings of hope. Other commentators, such as Bill Gidding, pointed out that in England the votes for radical alternatives rose, and there was no swing from Labour to Conservatives between 2010 and 2015.[3]

The May election crystallised the thinking of many who in one way or another oppose the power of the 1 per cent. Rebecca Winson, a writer and an activist for GMB Young London, wrote on the day after the election: 'Labour, Green, Tusc [Trade Union and Socialist Coalition] and even Lib Dem progressives must work together to oppose what's going to happen. We're all on the same side now.'[4] She ended her piece by saying:

If you can, be kind to those you argue with, because compassion changes more minds than anger, even though it's harder to muster. Be kind to the poor, the disabled, the immigrants, the workers and to anyone who's a bit different. The government won't be, you see.

Concern about the implications of rising inequality is growing among the well-to-do, who occasionally deign to look down from the hill from over their high garden walls and worry that neither hill nor walls are high enough. Today, the London Riots of 2011 are often referred to when you speak to the rich about inequality. Clearly, for many of the elite, poverty and inequality would only be of minor concern were it not for the fear of insurrection. As the poor are pushed out of London the elite feel safer, but all the time more people are living on the breadline, especially in London where rents are skyrocketing. Forecasts published the week after the election suggested that London house prices could double to average £1 million a property by 2030, and surveys were released showing that the richest fifth in Britain held on average 105 times the wealth of the poorest fifth.[5]

It is not just in the UK and in the capital that a fear of the impoverished is growing. This is now an international concern. The Canadian Liberal Party leader, Justin Trudeau, issued a dire warning to Canadians as to what may lie ahead if the gap between rich and poor doesn't narrow:

In short, fairness for the middle class and those working hard to join it is good for all of us. It's good for Canada, and, I might say, if we don't deliver fairness, Canadians will eventually entertain more radical options. All of the time I've spent with Canadians tells me that the status quo is not sustainable. Change is coming, my friends. What we need is leadership and a plan to shape that change responsibly, for the benefit of all.[6]

‘My friends’, Justin said, underscoring the fact he was addressing people like himself, a well-heeled gathering at the Canadian Club. He was inviting his audience to talk about people like ‘them’, those who might be driven to undefined radical options out of desperation. But is this kind of talk too late? Isn’t it high time the men and women outside the gates of the wealthy pursued those more radical options?

The day before the election, it was revealed that the Coalition government’s Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) had conducted forty-nine reviews of benefit-related deaths. Many of those deaths had been recorded as suicides, but some could have been deaths from starvation. We have no way of knowing as the DWP refused to release the information, leading to an investigation from the information watchdog.[7]

Those forty-nine are a tiny sample of all the deaths thought to be connected to benefit cuts made since the coalition government took power in 2010. Between 2010 and 2013 many thousands of working-age people died in the days and weeks after they had their benefits withdrawn.[8] In 2013/14 the ledger of deaths grew longer.[9] The records do not even include the elderly who died earlier than they otherwise would.[10] A twenty-four-minute silent movie lists some of the younger victims. I stopped watching it nine minutes in. At that point you learn of Christelle, thirty-two, who was pregnant and died clutching her five-month-old son, Kayjah. I could not watch it anymore. She jumped from a third-floor balcony after her benefits had been stopped. We do not know if Christelle and Kayjah’s are two of the forty-nine cases that have been reviewed in secret.

The coalition government was not kind, and the new government will be even less so now the Conservatives are working alone. Not everyone was callous in the Coalition, but most of those with any sympathetic feeling left of their own accord if they weren’t pushed. In late summer 2013, by chance I met Lib Dem MP Sarah Teather, then the education minister. She was walking alone and

in tears. A few days later I heard she had been sacked from the cabinet as part of a broad government reshuffle. Nick Clegg said he was 'disappointed' by Ms Teather's subsequent decision to stand down as an MP in 2015. Sir Menzies Campbell, the Liberal Democrats' former leader, said, 'Coalition is not for the faint hearted.'[11]

In November 2012 Sarah Teather had voted against the coalition for the first time, having called the Benefit Cap 'immoral and divisive'. Between April 2013 and February 2015 as many as 59,000 households had their housing benefit capped, 45 per cent of these lived in London, where rents are so much higher.[12] Almost all those households will have included children. At any one time over twenty thousand households were being capped, but when you get evicted for rent arrears you come off the list. Her government were not kind, but Sarah was – so she had to go because she couldn't take part in the heartlessness any longer.

In 2012, 1,046,398 sanctions were applied to people claiming jobseeker's allowance. The minuscule weekly income of the very poorest people in Britain was being docked, almost always for a petty misdemeanour. These offences included not attending a meeting in a jobseeker office because the claimant was attending an interview for an actual job elsewhere. A further 32,128 people scraping by on the employment and support allowance, because they were not working due to illness or disability, had their benefits cut for some similar infringement. On top of this a further 44,000 lone parents receiving income support, because they had little or no other income, were sanctioned for indeterminate stretches of time during that year and lost income they needed to prevent them and their children going hungry. Lives were destroyed, people were shamed, and atrocities were being committed.

We have no record of how many children were harmed by the 1.1 million financial sanctions applied in just one year to Britain's poorest families. Every

single one of these families was already living on less than the Minimum Income Standard for the UK. We know that because benefit levels in Britain remain pegged far below the level deemed minimal to provide an acceptable standard of living by the British public, and those benefits drop further every year.[13] What we do know about the scale of mass sanctions is a result of the tireless research carried out by David Webster of the University of Glasgow, who stated:

Decisions on guilt are made in secret by officials who have no independent responsibility to act lawfully. Yet the 'transgressions' (DWP's own word), which are punished by this system, are almost exclusively very minor matters, such as missing a single interview with a Jobcentre or Work Programme contractor, or not making quite as many token job applications as the Jobcentre adviser demands.[14]

Webster noted that in the same year that 1.1 million sanctions were applied Great Britain's magistrates' and sheriff courts of Great Britain imposed a total of only 849,000 fines. Not only that, but the scale of penalties handed out by courts is less punitive than the sanctions visited on benefits claimants. The failure to make the correct number of token job applications in a week leads to a harsher punishment than shoplifting does. What better incentive could there be to encourage shoplifting, especially now even taking out-of-date food from supermarket waste-bins counts as theft?[15] No wonder Sarah Teather was in tears by the end of the summer of 2013. She knew what was happening and could no longer stomach it, could no longer condone the sadism, unlike so many of her Liberal and almost all her Conservative colleagues.

Some people are rarely kind. What made cruel or keeps them that way is often a mystery, but they are a minority. Being kind is not an attribute usually associated with acquiring riches or getting ahead in right-wing politics. And it is

easy to make cuts if you don't sympathise. It is easier if you think of others as less deserving than you, or otherwise different, or not worthy of respect for any of a wide variety of ill-conceived reasons.

It's easy to make cuts if you don't sympathise and it is easier not to sympathise if you are protected from the cuts and they don't immediately affect you. The income of the 1 per cent has been protected while incomes and benefits for the poorest have been slashed and sanctioned. At the same time there have been huge cuts to local authority budgets (with more to come) and subsequently massive cuts in services for the most vulnerable – to social care, youth services, mental health services – developments which leave the 1 per cent, and indeed many others, largely unaffected. Wealthier members of society can afford to go private when it comes to health care or education.

If we look at the demographics of the people most affected by the cuts, what we see is very telling. Since 2010 some 79 per cent of all cuts have hit the income of women. In part, this is because most parents raising a child alone are women, but austerity has also taken a heavy toll on public services used by women, and a disproportionate number of women who were working in public services have lost their jobs or been made to go part-time.

In 2012 an estimated 3.5 million children were living in poverty.[16] In 2013 the Fawcett Society estimated that a total of £14.9 billion had been cut from benefits, tax credits, pay and pensions, with 74 per cent of this being taken from women's incomes. By 2014 they found that the inequality gap between women and men was actually rising.[17] Data from 2014 shows that two-thirds of all the welfare cuts in Scotland came from families with children. Lone parents have lost £1,800 a year, £400 more than families with two parents and more resources. But the cuts have been even deeper for the disabled, who have, on average, £,2000 less to live on every year.[18]

Because the UK government hid and delayed the publication of the statistics, academic researchers in England have been forced to use data passed to the European Statistical Office. That data shows that George Osborne misled parliament in March 2015 when he said people were better-off than they had been in 2010. Data collected across the whole of the UK actually revealed that living standards had fallen for all but the very richest. Increasing numbers of people have reported falling behind with their rent or struggling just to pay fuel bills. Almost half the population cannot now afford to repair or replace their fridge or cooker immediately should one or the other break down. 'Only the very richest (those who could make ends meet very easily) saw no perceived fall in their living standards.'[19]

In the UK, the lives of the 1 per cent have followed a very different trajectory to those of the rest of the population. Those who get by 'very easily' have not seen a drop in their incomes. But that does not mean they feel any better off. Inequality within the 1 per cent is growing rapidly. At the very top of the 1 per cent, the richest 1,000 families have seen their wealth double since 2005, with each family worth an average of £547 million by 2015. Yet even that is a fairly meaningless average because there is more inequality within the 1,000 richest families in the UK than there is in the rest of the 1 per cent.[20]

At the top of British society it is easy to feel envious. For example, a young man on an annual income of £160,000, without children, who just scrapes into the 1 per cent category, knows that, in his probably modest but very central London apartment, he is a world away from those living in the largest mansions to be found, as the crow flies, a few minutes away. He is unlikely ever to comfortably keep up with those he sees as his peers. It is a world in which you can never have enough money or enough of the things it can buy.

Living in a society that tolerates gross wealth and income inequalities makes it hard to empathise with a wide range of other people. The very rich may

ignore you in the same way you sometimes don't notice the person sweeping the street as you walk by. Or the very rich try not to notice you – just as you might have learnt to try not to notice the people sleeping rough in the entrance to the Tube or bus station. You are as far down, and your life as frightening to the very rich, as the destitute are to you.

It becomes almost impossible to get through the day at the top of British society if you look down. The vertigo is too hard to bear. What difference can it make to someone so far beneath you if they have to live on a few less pounds a day? Surely they just need to budget better. When you cannot empathise with another group, it is very hard to think kindly towards them. It is when you feel "we're all in it together" or at least "there but for the grace of God, go I" that kindness comes naturally.

The UK is on a trajectory to become the most unequal of the richest twenty-five nations in the world.[21] Those in power in the most unequal of rich countries today, especially the UK, cannot imagine that kindness works. They see kindness as weakness. Had they been kinder, less aggressive, when they were younger and making their way in the world, they would probably not have got to where they are today.

Kindness is a trait to be shunned and derided by those currently in power. Violence, action, force and what they call 'civility' is what is needed.[22] Kindness does not help the poor, they say, and instead they offer the 'tough love' of sanctions. And if the poor die early, well they were weak and this is survival of the fittest at play. When the elite now in charge hear of a young mother, denied benefits, jumping from a balcony holding her child, some do not shudder. They think this is 'collateral damage' in their 'war on poverty'. Such thinking began with the deaths we inflicted on civilians living abroad in wars for resources in the Middle East. Casualties become seen as inevitable.

The rich do not think like you and you do not think like the rich. That is why you are shocked by what they do when they hold power. ‘How can they do this?’ you ask. ‘Can’t they see?’ The answers are first, ‘Easily,’ and second, ‘No.’ They are working for what they believe to be a greater good – and you are unfortunate flotsam and jetsam that happen to be in their way. Just as the roofless and the beggars and the poor are ‘unfortunate’, so too are you. It is just unfortunate you are not rich enough to pay your universities fees and have to take out a loan; unfortunate you don’t have a trust fund or at least an inheritance to look forward to. They are simply lucky to be ‘privileged’, or so they are taught to think. With gross inequality comes segregation and a consequent lack of knowledge about how the other person lives.

There was a time when hardly anyone was roofless in the UK, when you never met a beggar and those with least were not that different from those in the middle – they had enough to feel included in society. I was young then. As I age it becomes harder to remember when I first saw teenagers sleeping rough, or was first asked for ‘the price of a cup of tea’, or first realized that because I could make some choices whereas others couldn’t, that they were no longer free. But I grew up in a country without many youngsters bedding down in sleeping bags, without people jumping from third-floor balconies clutching their children because their dole had been cut, without people choosing to die to avoid having to beg and feeling that they have no other choice.

Luckily, you don’t have to rely on the memories of the old to know that a more equal world is possible, a world where the 1 per cent take a far smaller share of the cake. The 1 per cent by definition will always be those taking the largest slice, but it needn’t be such a great fat slice it leaves only slithers for the rest. Question those who say that it can only be this way. Try to question them kindly rather than with incredulity. A society based on merit would be remarkably equitable compared with what we face today. No one is worth 3,000 times someone else. The 3,000-fold inequalities within the 1 per cent are just as indefensible as those between them and the other 99 per cent.

A slow revolution means you are in it for the long haul. But it will be worth it when finally we begin to create a more equal country for all. It will be worth it because we will know that although no one can predict the future, the next generation and those that follow them will not have to grow up in a world of ignorant untruths, among them the notion that only a few people are truly able and the rest are commodities and worth very little on the job market. Do we pay them a living wage or a minimum wage, we muse? These are differences in sums of money tiny to many of us.

It will be worth it if we turn the tide because, even if we do not care that much, in our old age people who have the time and peace of mind will care for us, not least because we cared for them when they were younger. It will be worth it because we will know that it could have been much worse had we stood by and done nothing unselfish. No one who is sane dies thinking that if they had just tried a little harder they could have made another million. But they do die lamenting a world they are leaving becoming more cruel, greedy and callous. And they do worry about the generations to come.

Gross inequality creates a lack of respect for anyone who is not like us. There is contempt among the rich for the poor, and that will seed the same among the poor for the rich. Cruelty and hate flourish. This pervasive lack of respect is not new and has grown between groups many times before, over religion, race, nationality, social class, sex and sexuality. These older divisions remain and can easily tear us apart. However, nowadays it is financial inequality, both globally and in the UK, that is the greatest source of division.

What is needed is understanding and generosity, hope and perseverance, but above all kindness. Kindness is patient, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it is not self-seeking.[23] Every kind action is worthwhile. The greedy waste the lives of others but they also waste their own lives through their greed. They are not worthy of envy.

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