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## **TAKING EQUALITY** Out of the Left Ghetto

by Bill Kerry

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## TAKING EQUALITY out of the left Ghetto

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### Introduction

Following publication of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, Bill Kerry argues that genuine progressives, those who believe in greater equality of outcomes and not just opportunity, must now argue from the point of view of people's interests rather than by appeals to social justice. In addition, equality must now be fused with the themes of environmental sustainability and economic democracy in order to create a coherent set of ideas relevant to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Whilst the article deals with the UK and its political scene, the principles are applicable across the developed world where we are seeing the end of what economic growth can do for general levels of wellbeing.

Bill Kerry is Secretary and co-founder of **The Equality Trust**  
[www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk)

### PART 1: Equality and harnessing the politics of interest

In July 2007 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported in its survey entitled *Public Attitudes to Economic Inequality* that: "Over the last 20 years, a large and enduring majority of people (73 per cent in 2004) have considered the gap between high and low incomes too large". In addition they note that: "People do not necessarily think that those on low incomes are underpaid, but that those on higher incomes are very overpaid".

It is reasonable to suppose that the proportion sharing this view has almost certainly increased during the current economic crisis which has thrown into

sharp relief the pay of bankers and then MP pay and perks.

However, we know that these majorities do not translate into supporting or voting for progressive politics – the same Joseph Rowntree Foundation report notes: "Public attitudes to redistribution are complex, ambiguous and apparently contradictory. Current evidence does not explain why a smaller proportion of people support redistribution than see the income gap as too large".

Remedying this shortfall is, I believe, where progressives need to focus. Once we articulate the vision of a healthier and happier future and show that greater equality is the only sustainable route to that future we can create a convergence between equality politics and a majority of people's interests which will be a very powerful motor for change.

Progressives can now demonstrate, from an incredibly strong evidential base, what the UK could achieve if it moved from being one of the most unequal societies in the developed world to being one of the most equal - for example: rates of mental illness (five times better); rates of imprisonment (five times better) and rates of obesity (six times better). The evidence also indicates that major improvements would be made in levels of trust, participation in community life, educational performance, physical health, life expectancy, teen births, levels of violence and social mobility - as well as fostering a more constructive approach to environmental issues. The improvements to be gained by becoming a more equal society are so large that they cannot be explained simply by reference to improving conditions for the poorest sections of society. It is clear that the benefits of greater equality go right across the social scale.

This means that progressives have a historic opportunity to present the case for greater equality as a "good news" story – one that appeals to the vast majority and which promises greater wellbeing,

greater economic stability and real progress in tackling looming environmental crises. Progressives can at last shed their hair-shirts and start spreading hope and optimism for a change.

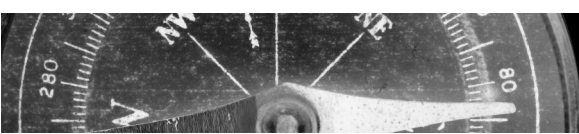
### The role of The Equality Trust

The Equality Trust was formed in order to provide and promote the hard evidence that greater equality improves the quality of life for almost everyone. By doing this the Trust aims to inform a new progressive politics and aid the development of the broadest possible consensus on the benefits of greater equality. Such an evidence-led approach, we think, provides the best chance of winning the necessary majority, the best chance of spreading progressive politics beyond the left ghetto and into the leafy suburbs, the white-collar workplaces and the corridors of power - national, regional and local.

### The end of growth – the new fact on the block

Evidence presented in *The Spirit Level* demonstrates clearly that for the UK and other developed countries we have pretty much reached the limits of what economic growth can do for people in terms of delivering a better life for the vast majority. More economic growth adds little or nothing to life expectancy and does not improve measures of happiness or wellbeing for societies in the developed world. By contrast, there is clear evidence showing that, within these societies, greater equality is now the key way to deliver improved health, happiness and general wellbeing for the vast majority.

The environmental aspect to the "end of growth" message is also clear and can only boost the arguments for greater equality. However, even before we reach the desired "steady state" economy, there are shorter term gains to be had - more equal societies recycle more, they have lower CO2 emissions per dollar of output, their business leaders are more likely to support international environmental



agreements and they are less consumerist and wasteful of the earth's resources.

In the developing world, however, economic growth is still important and continues to deliver real improvements in wellbeing. The developed world and the developing world link up on the equality agenda because there is evidence that more equal developed countries are more helpful to developing countries in terms of giving more overseas aid, scoring higher on the Global Peace Index and being more likely to adhere to international treaties that often aim to benefit the developing world.

As The Equality Trust and others link greater equality with environmental concerns, this will lead to a major head-on challenge to mainstream political orthodoxy which is largely unquestioning of growth and its supposed benefits. The current orthodoxy seems to be pinning its hopes on various forms of environmentally friendly "techno-fix" but the required massive investment is lacking from a risk-averse and short-termist private sector and a near-bankrupt public sector – and all the while the clock is ticking.

### **Making greater equality relevant at an individual, family and community level**

As well as promoting the macro-level "equality not growth" argument, progressives have to develop micro-level arguments at the individual, family and community level and for each separate social or environmental issue that is affected by inequality. Only this way can the new progressive politics remain relevant. For example, if we look at the housing market, excessive incomes at the top and insufficient incomes at the bottom have caused an unstable market characterised by a dangerously inflated overall market, property speculation, collapse of the first-time buyer market, rural price-out, homelessness and, of course, the horrendous levels of debt that are now crushing so many people.

In fact nearly all the issues that dominate current discourse are easily related to income inequality and the stressed, hierarchical society it produces. However, progressives tend not to deal with matters on an issue by issue basis. There is a tendency to stand on our moral mound and pronounce that it's all to do with inequality and Thatcher's legacy. We then turn around and exit stage left to applause from our friends in the audience who already agree with us anyway. This will not help us win the necessary majority.

Whilst progressives should always try to change the terms of the debate, by linking up all the separate social and environmental problems with inequality at every opportunity, we must also be ready to make relevant and digestible arguments for each and every health, social and environmental problem caused by inequality. This is how the issues are currently dealt with in policy-making and in popular discourse – as discrete, largely unrelated problems. Arguing that all the separate problems of society are linked to inequality is unlikely to help us win an argument on a radio phone-in which is specifically dealing with obesity or mental illness or youth crime. It will not help us get a hearing when the government unveils its latest ideas on reducing teen births. Sadly, progressives do not have the luxury of determining the field of battle. If we do not rise to this challenge then equality and sustainability politics will remain at the margins as something slightly utopian, exotic or "other" and will be regarded with suspicion by the majority of the people that we need to win over.

### **Taking back aspiration from the right – the development of social aspiration**

Relating greater equality to the everyday concerns of the public will show that policies promoting greater equality are the policies that promote the interests of individuals, families and local communities. This way we can contribute to the development of a more rounded concept of aspiration – one could almost say "social

aspiration". In a socially aspiring society people will be aware that greater equality increases their chances of living in a peaceful neighbourhood where their children can get into a decent local school and where they may actually be able to afford their own home.

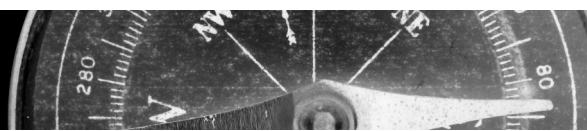
A more equal society has to be promoted as a practical solution to everyday concerns as well as larger-scale concerns such as climate change – it has to be promoted primarily as supportive and nurturing of people's interests and less so by hopeful appeals to morality, social justice and a spirit of sacrifice.

### **PART II: Getting the message across**

Progressives need to promote a new language of equality, one that resonates with as broad a section of society as possible and attempts to win them to a consensus in favour of equality. Again, such an approach flows directly from the evidence assembled in *The Spirit Level* which shows that the gains of a more equal society go right across the whole of society.

In party political terms, progressives arguing the equality and sustainability agenda will need to consider where best to target their resources. Traditionally it would have been the Labour Party but we need to be alive to a potentially shifting scene which could, in my view, include any of the following in the next, say, 10-20 years: the further advance of the Greens, a leftward shift in the Labour Party, a split in the Labour Party, a Lib-Lab pact after the next election or a Lib-Tory pact, a further attempt to forge left unity outside of the Labour Party, a functioning Red-Green alliance or even the development of a new "social" (One Nation) wing of the Tory party perhaps influenced by fresh thinking on the right such as Philip Blond's Red Toryism.

Several implications flow from such a fluid political environment and the likelihood that equality and sustainability will need to be promoted to people who are not



traditionally seen as receptive to such arguments.

### Setting a hopeful tone

The campaigning tone adopted by progressives has to be one of hope and inclusiveness. We need to stay away from brow-beating and finger-pointing and allowing ourselves to be portrayed by a lazy media as dour communists or modern-day Levellers.

We should always accentuate the positive, emphasise what greater equality can achieve – even more so than emphasising the undoubted evils of inequality. We need to sell an inspiring vision. The message is likely to travel further and be received more sympathetically if it is delivered in this way. In the current climate of economic gloom, social unease and seemingly irreversible environmental doom people may be ready to hear something positive and uplifting.

### Using accessible language

Progressives should use, wherever possible, an inclusive and non-ideological terminology as it seeks to win the progressive majority, for example: - ordinary people or working people instead of working class and middle class; transformation instead of revolution, and; employee rights, power and control instead of trade union rights, strikes and struggles. We have to engage with UK society as it is - which I would say is individualistic, fairly apolitical, conservative and fearful - and not as we would wish it to be. We must talk in a language that does not switch people off.

### Staying rooted in the evidence

Progressives should argue for greater equality on the basis that, objectively, it is simply the case that more equal societies are better for the vast majority of their inhabitants – a utilitarian approach. Any venturing into debates over policy or politics will be best served by staying firmly rooted in such evidence rather than

polemical or theoretical argument. The latter only increases the scope for progressives to be misinterpreted and/or misrepresented. We need to shed more light than heat.

### PART III: A new progressive economics

Under the current government we have seen unprecedented levels of public spending yet the gains have been modest at best and have done little to allay the widespread perception that ours is still a deeply troubled society where public money is often wasted or poorly targeted. Allied to the new utilitarian politics of equality and sustainability, progressives must now move beyond tax and spend. We need to advocate a fundamental transformation towards economic democracy - where the ownership and control of the structures and institutions of our economy are vested in the widest possible numbers of people who are then engaged in the running or stewardship of those institutions. It is precisely the lack of real democracy, accountability and active participation in our economic system that has created the latest economic crisis that now engulfs us all.

Transformation needs to be about more than piecemeal, legislative reform handed down by parliament to deal with specific issues as they arise – and which can easily be reversed by the next government. Transformational policies and ideas should emerge via employee education, engagement and action as much as through political parties, policies and processes. The pressure for transformation can (and should) come more from below than it does from the top.

### Economic democracy

As well as advocating employee ownership of businesses, economic democracy will need to include other elements. The growth of co-operatives in the private sector needs to be mirrored in the case of public sector institutions and services. New forms of service delivery

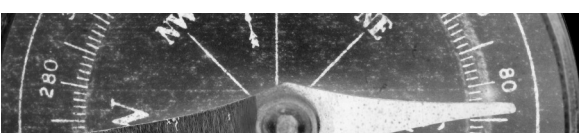
where public bodies and services are controlled democratically by co-operation between employees and end-users should be advocated. This would challenge the essentially right-wing analysis that suggests public service employees' interests are somehow opposed to those of the service users, an idea that has been ruthlessly used to privatise public services under the guise of the "choice agenda".

Progressives also need to get to grips with profit and suggest alternatives to the myopic and harmful profit maximisation model and the corporate constitutions that facilitate it. A concept of "social profit" or "sustainable profit" would be an interesting area to explore – one where the rate of profit genuinely takes into account all those externalities (principally employees and the environment) that are currently ignored under the profit-maximising model. The concept could then be developed into a financial model that relates profit to the business as a whole such that profit is not just what's left over after every cost has been driven into the floor. And profit should, at the very least, be related to genuine risk-taking, effort and/or innovation. Developing concepts to distinguish between "good profit" and "bad profit" may be another useful area to consider.

### PART IV: Some conclusions

Human flourishing is best realised in conditions of relative equality. This was recognised in Britain long before the modern inventions of socialism and communism. It perhaps found its first real voice in the period leading up to the English Civil War when, through a religious prism, many people advocated land and goods being held "in common".

For progressives the pursuit of greater equality should have the unquestioned, primary importance that the pursuit of greater profits has for those who believe fervently in the capitalist system. The interests of manufacturing and finance capital are not always the same and competition between firms and



entrepreneurs is often sharp and hostile, especially in trying economic times, but none of them would ever question the profit motive.

It is the sort of overriding pre-eminence enjoyed by the profit motive in capitalist circles that we should be trying to gain for ideas of equality amongst progressives. By re-asserting the primary importance of greater equality on an evidential basis we have the chance to establish a new political space where progressives of all hues can come together and then reach out to new supporters in order to win a majority. To aid this process, progressives should concentrate on achieving a new, simple, optimistic and inclusive narrative which:

1. relates the greater equality argument to people's everyday lives at every opportunity to show that greater equality is supportive of their direct interests;
2. promotes the macro-level "equality not growth" argument at every opportunity and stresses that this does not mean an end to technical change, innovation and improvement;
3. uses plain, accessible, jargon-free language to deliver a hopeful and inclusive message about the possibilities for a better society, and;
4. advocates economic democracy as the principal way to deliver sustainable, stable and high levels of wellbeing in the future.

In doing this, I believe that we can help lay the basis for a broad consensus in favour of greater equality – where the proportion that votes for and supports progressive policies in the UK mirrors the proportion that already believes inequality is too great.

Bill Kerry is Secretary and co-founder of  
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Compass is the democratic left pressure group,  
whose goal is to debate  
and develop the ideas for a more equal  
and democratic world, then  
campaign and organise to help ensure  
they become reality.

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Southbank House, Black Prince Road, London SE1 7SJ  
T: +44 (0) 207 463 0633 M: +44 (0) 7900 195591 [gavin@compassonline.org.uk](mailto:gavin@compassonline.org.uk)  
[www.compassonline.org.uk](http://www.compassonline.org.uk)