

Glass conflict

Danny Dorling

Published 12 January 2010: Roof Magazine, 35,1, page 10. Author's version:

David Cameron's claim to understand poverty and his wish to 'eradicate dependency' seem wide of the mark, argues Danny Dorling

For two years at Oxford, I overlapped with prominent Bullingdon club Conservatives. I was not in their set and didn't see Boris Johnson hiding in the bushes at the botanical gardens in his attempt to evade arrest, nor the very young-looking George Osborne in his tailcoat.

I did once get hit by a champagne glass thrown from what I think was a Brasenose College window, but I have no evidence that it was David Cameron who threw it.

Like Jeffrey Archer, I wasn't studying at the university. I was at secondary school, and it came as a shock that there were people who happily threw glasses at schoolchildren out of college windows.

Recently, I heard Mr Cameron say, 'Don't dare lecture us on poverty' and it reminded me of that strange-shaped glass that broke as it bounced off my head.

Many children growing up in Oxford could not name the city's colleges or identify types of wine glasses, but they do know what it is like to live in a city and a country where the powerful look down on the less well off and appear to see straight through them.

In November, Mr Cameron announced that his party would reduce state intervention to 'eradicate dependency' and bring back the 'natural bonds of duty and responsibility'.

The government responded to Cameron's speech saying, 'David Cameron is calling for the state to withdraw, leaving people to fend for themselves and charities and community groups to pick up the pieces. This is a return to Thatcherism, or even 19th century liberalism – cutting back on government action on poverty, yet still backing tax cuts for the wealthiest estates.'

Strong words, yet this was the same government that cut taxes for the wealthy when it doubled the inheritance tax threshold at the end of 2007, the same government that brought in private contractors to insult people on the dole in a futile attempt to get the growing ranks of unemployed to compete harder for jobs.

This was the government that had brought markets into health, education and housing to the detriment of peoples' expectations to be treated fairly, regardless of where they came from or how well they could play the market.

Cameron's policies are just a stronger brand of what we have been forced to accept already. Earlier this year, he outlined his plans for housing. He would abolish 'all

regional planning and housing powers exercised by regional government, returning powers and discretion back to local communities', he would reduce funding of poorer areas (what he calls 'equalising away by Whitehall').

He would allow citizens to veto council tax rises, but says nothing about allowing them to object to the affluent being taxed less. He would give local authorities the discretion to reduce business rates for businesses they favoured.

His party says that it will 'permit local authorities to devolve unlimited funding to ward councillors'. Try to imagine arranging social service, education and housing where for every appointment or decision, council officers have to go cap in hand for funding to a councillor.

Regional development agencies are also to be abolished because they 'demonstrated insufficient empathy with the needs of business.' But all the Conservatives will be doing is increasing the sums transferred from the North to the South – this amounted to £150 million in 2009 when monies were cut from the regional development budgets to fund the housing market rescue packages.

Conservative policy on housing, education, health, social security and employment is just a more callous version of New Labour. Some assistance may be given by those architects of New Labour policy who have already shifted across to the Conservative benches or 'networks'. Blair advisers Sally Morgan and Julian le Grand are to help with the 'new schools network'. David Freud, once a welfare tsar, has entered the Lords and now appears in Conservative party broadcasts.

If the *Daily Mail* is to be believed, Trevor Phillips, head of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, has apparently been persuaded by this friend, Peter Mandelson, not to shift sides. However, according to the *Telegraph*, the chief executive of the charity Tomorrow's People, Debbie Scott, has jumped in with Cameron. Many more will follow.

I left Oxford, and my chances of bumping into the Bullingdon boys, to go to university in Newcastle in 1986. I live in Sheffield now.

When Cameron was young he apparently used to visit Sheffield. Wikipedia, a source as reliable as our major newspapers, says he 'spent much of his early life in Totley, Sheffield'. But in the late 1970s and 1980s, Totley was nowhere like the parts of South Yorkshire featured in the film *Brassed Off* where 'Coco the Scab' (Stephen Tompkinson) gave his speech about how God made Tories: 'We've got all these bodies left, but we're right out of brains and we're right out of hearts and we're right out of vocal cords...'

We have recently published a report, funded by a Sheffield MP, which shows the big differences in wealth that still exist on opposite sides of the city. Cameron may have seen one side – the affluent bit in Totley – but he is not in a position to judge the other.

During his student days at Brasenose, he probably had a few lectures on poverty. But that gap in his knowledge needs to be addressed before he is equipped to take on the role of leading us all – rich and poor.

Danny's latest book Injustice: Why Social Inequalities Persist will be published by Policy Press in 2010.
