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Interview with Danny Dorling

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Interview with Professor Danny Dorling

Transcript of Kerry O'Brien's interview with Professor Danny Dorling, Professor of Human Geography in the University of Sheffield. The interview was part of Four Corners' screening of the True Vision documentary "Poor Kids", broadcast Monday 3 October 2011.

KERRY O'BRIEN, PRESENTER: Poverty from the mouths of little children; children who represent something like 25 per cent of Britain's next generation. And even as they speak their numbers are likely to be growing.

There is no faster route to poverty than unemployment, and Britain, Europe and the US are all teetering on the brink of a second recession since the global financial crisis. Governments in both regions are facing harsh austerity measures as they try to turn their massive sovereign debt around. Some European cities already have more than 20 per cent of their workers unemployed.

Danny Dorling is an academic author whose book, *Injustice: Why social inequality persists*, argues that the rise in Britain's wealth disparity through the period from Thatcherism and Blair's New Labour through to the present day is unsustainable. He says the story in America is similar.

I recorded this interview with Danny Dorling from our London studio.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Danny, how did the documentary on the poor children of Britain impact on you? How did their stories gel with your statistics?

PROFESSOR DANNY DORLING, UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD: The stories they tell and the story of the documentary gels very closely to what the statistics say. But when you hear the stories coming out of the mouths of children it's very different from when somebody like me says this is going on.

KERRY O'BRIEN: You've said that Britain's inequality today is as bad as it was in Dickensian times. How do you justify such a big call?

DANNY DORLING: You measure it. So there are several ways in which we measure it. One is the life expectancy gap between areas. Now, people live a lot longer than Dickensian times but in Dickensian times there were gaps of 10, 11, 12 years between poor cities and richer suburbs. Those gaps narrowed since the Victorian times. They narrowed particularly by the 1960s and 70s but they've widened again so that between different parts of Britain now, some people in entire cities can expect to live, men: 12, 13, 14 years less than men in some affluent parts of London.

KERRY O'BRIEN: But surely on other measures like health, education and housing the standards would have to be better than they were in Dickensian times, Victorian times?

DANNY DORLING: The average standard is better but the gaps between people has widened again. Another example to give you - if you're looking at inequality in income, one per cent of people in Britain round about 1920 were taking almost a fifth of all income, the richest one per cent. That declined but it's gone back up to the richest one per cent taking a fifth of all income again now, and that leaves far less income for everybody else.

KERRY O'BRIEN: So why, in your view, has the gap between rich and poor grown so dramatically in the past 40 odd years through both Conservative and Labour rule?

DANNY DORLING: It's not party politics, it's not a particular set of politicians who have gone one way or the other. The gap was narrowing all the way from the late 1920s through to the 1970s with different politicians in power at different times.

It was under, in America the Reagan years, in Britain under the Thatcher years when the tide was changed, but the increase in inequality has happened in many parts of the globe, it's just been allowed to happen more ferociously if you like in Britain and in the United States than say in mainland Europe.

KERRY O'BRIEN: This is the trickle-down theory you're referring to, that if you create more wealth at the top it trickles down to all levels.

DANNY DORLING: There was more faith in trickle-down in the United States than in Britain, than in much of the rest of the rich world and we in Britain, it became patently obvious by the end of the 1980s, start of the 90s that the trickle-down wasn't trickling down.

So having faith in something that doesn't work is certainly a problem.

KERRY O'BRIEN: The impacts of the global financial crisis are clearly still being felt. One recent study has suggested that the impacts of recent recession in Britain, on measures like household income, have only really started to show up this year. Would you expect recession to widen or narrow the inequality gap?

DANNY DORLING: What normally happens when there are recessions, particularly the great crash in 1929, is that the gaps narrow because the rich lose more say of their share income and so on. This hasn't happened since 2008.

In Britain, house prices have carried on going up in the middle of London where the very richest people live, so their wealth has gone up and up. But in the rest of the country housing prices are dropping, incomes are dropping, average living standards for average people are dropping and they're dropping fastest for people at the bottom because of benefit cuts.

So this is an unusual recession and, with the cut so far, in that what's happening in Britain, is that the rich who are actually getting richer, the average is getting slightly poorer and the people who are poor are

doing much, much worse than they were two or three years ago because a whole set of things are being taken away from them.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Where do the working poor feature in this equation of inequality?

DANNY DORLING: Half the people who are officially classified, half the families officially classified as poor in Britain contain at least one person who's working, who's being paid a wage. And we have a minimum wage but that minimum wage is not enough to get that family out of poverty. And what this shows you is that jobs alone are simply not enough.

What you need to have a much lower rate of poverty is a much more narrow income distribution, so fewer people are being paid enormous salaries and fewer people are being paid tiny salaries. That's how you get rid of, or reduce, child poverty to some of the lowest levels in the rich nations of the world, it is by not having a really wide distribution of incomes.

KERRY O'BRIEN: What would you regard as an acceptable wealth gap?

DANNY DORLING: When you ask people what kind of gaps are acceptable they tend to say fairly narrow gaps, or what somebody like me thinks is fairly narrow, so somebody earning 10 times more than somebody else.

Now chief executives of the biggest companies in Britain are earning at least 300 times more, 300 times more than the average worker. Recently government in Britain looked at imposing a 20 to 1 ratio in the public sector: the idea that nobody paid by government should earn 20 times more than somebody else paid by government in that same organisation. But the government here rejected implementing it.

So people want gaps which are much smaller, which are say a 10 to 1 or even 6 to 1, but we have 20 to 1 in the public sector or 300 to 1 plus in the private sector.

KERRY O'BRIEN: You've said the British are now the Americans of Europe. What do you mean by that?

DANNY DORLING: It's not a great complement about modern America. For instance, the British (per head) lock up more people in their prisons than anywhere else in Western Europe. We have well over 80,000 people locked up and it's rising rapidly since the riots this summer. America has 2 million people locked up.

America is one of the few big, rich countries in the world where you have people going hungry and having to be given food stamps in large numbers and so on. But Britain is the country most similar for that and it's moving towards the American degree of inequality and normality and from my point of view this is a tragedy, because there is no need in these incredibly rich countries for children to be born into and be growing up in the kind of poverty that the documentary has just shown.

But the reason for it isn't a lack of money, the reason for it is a lack of imagination and people thinking you have to have a cut throat, dog eat dog society otherwise your whole country won't do okay and these children will have to grow up in poverty because it's somehow necessary for economic competitiveness. It's just stupid and it's wrong, and we learnt before it was stupid and it's wrong, the question is how long will it take us to learn again.

KERRY O'BRIEN: When you see someone like Warren Buffett calling for the rich to be taxed more, where do you think he's coming from?

DANNY DORLING: There are lots of people right at the very top, within the top one per cent of the richest one per cent, who want the gaps to narrow, who've seen that the trickle-down fantasy doesn't work, who don't want to live in countries where they have to have body guards. They are, you know? If you want to see what extreme inequality is like you need to look at Brazil or South Africa.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Do you have any doubt that there is a connection between the recent riots in Britain and the inequality that you've measured?

DANNY DORLING: Recently two economists have done a brilliant job of showing (when they've used data for the last 100 years - from disorder in Germany in the 1930s right through to Greece in 2010) a statistical relationship that's very strong between government cutbacks, between inequalities rising and social disorder.

So when people think that things are getting worse and a government doesn't have their general interest at heart and is willing for the rich to get richer and most people to get poorer, over the last 100 years in many, many, countries that has been a trigger for social unrest and rioting. It isn't that rioters sit down and say, we'll do it for this reason, but there is a statistical relationship - you can expect trouble when you treat people in this kind of way.

KERRY O'BRIEN: I know you're not saying that this disparity you've measured is evidence of a fundamental failure of capitalism but if it's not, then what kind of challenge does it represent for capitalism?

DANNY DORLING: You have to have widespread consensus agreement that the current level of inequality is wrong, it's bad and it is going to be narrowed and it has to be narrowed and that ostentatious displays of wealth and celebrating people getting rich just because they've got rich has become vulgar and you stop doing it.

That's what we did before in Britain, that's what countries which have much lower levels of inequality do. They're not impressed by people showing off that they've managed to make a lot of money, and that's how you get much more civilised countries. There are lots of examples of it happening. It has happened in the past, it's possible to happen again.

But one of the main reasons you may get greater equality again is if people start to look forward to a future without it. ... You're looking at gated estates; you're looking at the people being helicoptered between cities because they're afraid to drive; and you're looking at much, much higher levels of crime and disorder by people who've got very little to lose because they're given so little in the first place.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Danny Dorling, thanks very much for talking with us.

DANNY DORLING: Thank you.

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