

Dorling, D. (2012) By 'eck, It's still grim up north (and further south than you think)..., Big Issue Magazine, April 3rd, <http://www.bigissue.com/features/829/way-we-live-now>

By 'eck, It's still grim up north (and further south than you think)...

Britain is becoming more divided again, politically, economically and socially. Geographically, the real North-South divide is further south than many presume. It runs from Gloucester to Grimsby and passes Bosworth, where the War of the Roses ended and England became united under the Tudors. Today Britain is becoming split apart again along that Tudor line (among the Irish baronetcies established following the Tudor conquest of Ireland was one for Chancellor George Osborne's ancestor).

When that other George, George Orwell, wrote about the chasm that grew between the North and South in the 1930s, he noted the indifference which southerners often appeared to express over the fate of those living in northern areas – the places that had recently become most blighted by economic downturn and retrenchment of monies in and around London.

The North-South dividing line is fractal: the closer you look at it the more detail you see. It weaves between fields and houses north of the old counties of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire. That such an exact line can be drawn is, of course, a fiction, but it is also fair to say that moving from North to South is not that gradual an experience. Nowadays ideas of a midlands region add more confusion than light.

Numerous facts of life divide the North from the South – there is a missing year of life expectancy north of the dividing line (probably largely due to a slow and steady net drift southwards of people with better health). For those who do gain a place at university, children south of the line are much more likely to attend Russell Group universities. Furthermore, a house-price cliff now runs along much of the line. And on the voting map, the line still often separates red from blue.

In terms of life chances the only line within another European country that is comparable with the North-South divide is that which used to separate East and West Germany. This is found not just in terms of relative differences in wealth either side of the line, but most importantly in terms of health, where some of the extremes of Europe are now found within our divided island.

The wealth divide is set to grow. Hardly any of the millions of pounds of tax cuts in last week's budget for the rich will end up in the pockets of people in the North. Instead, public sector wages in the North are to be reduced by the chancellor's plan for regional pay reflecting lower or higher costs of living (which will help pay for the handout to millionaires). Scotland and Wales could be particularly badly hit – is this a coincidence, considering these areas are traditionally the staunchest of red heartlands?

George Orwell invented a term for the language that his namesake, Chancellor George Osborne, used during his budget speech last week. The term was 'doublespeak' – language that deliberately disguises, distorts, or reverses the meaning of words. Osborne began his speech claiming "...the tax revenues we get from the wealthiest will increase", and then went on to announce a cut in the top rate of income tax that would hand over £40,000 to every person receiving around £1m a year, and more than double that for those receiving £2m, helping billionaires the most generously.

Perhaps Gideon Osborne changed his first name to George out of admiration for the writer Orwell who (unlike Gideon) got into Eton. Osborne might be rich but he has always been just on the edge of being fully accepted. He and his allies appear hell-bent on doing whatever they have to in order to win approval of those who are even richer. Orwell had quite a lot to say about why some people feel the need to suck up so much.