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It's Captain Tom's birthday. The past 100 years should teach us a powerful lesson



Danny Dorling

Over the NHS fundraiser's lifetime, inequality has dropped but shot back up again. After this crisis we must keep it down

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‘By the time Tom was 57 years old in 1977, the best-off took less than 6% of all income in Britain; three times less than when he was aged 12.’ A birthday message at Piccadilly Circus. Photograph: Toby Melville/Reuters

Tom Moore entered the world on 30 April 1920 as Britain was emerging from the worst pandemic since mortality records began: the influenza of 1918-19. Total mortality in the UK rose by 24% in a year in 1918. Tom was just nine years old when the bitterly cold winter of 1929 increased mortality by 15%, and a newly married husband aged 48 when the influenza pandemic of 1968 led to a mortality increase of 6%.

We do not yet know how Covid-19, the pandemic that inspired Captain Tom to begin his [record-breaking walk at the age of 99](#), will rank in this deadly league table; yet it will almost certainly be less deadly than the events of 1918, 1929 or 1968.

In 1937, when Tom was 17 years old, there was no National [Health](#) Service. It was a time of mass unemployment and mass poverty. One shilling in every six earned in Britain went to the best-off 1% of the population. The vast majority of Britons were poor. If they fell ill, they had to pay to see a doctor, or hope for charity.

When 20-year-old Tom was conscripted to the war effort in 1940, Britain began to change faster than it ever had before; the next 17 years would be some of the most remarkable in UK history. In 1957, when Tom was 37, the best-off 1% in the UK took only 9% of all national income. A great transformation had taken place and people were told they had never had it so good. But it would get better.

The influenza of 1968 returned in 1970 and again in 1972. One million people died worldwide. Yet it was a time when the global population was younger because of lower life expectancy than today; and it was a time of growing optimism and equality. By the time Tom was 57 years old in 1977, the best-off took less than 6% of all income in Britain; three times less than when he was aged 12. It was the smallest share they have ever taken; housing was affordable and there was full employment.

Tom could have expected the situation to get better still. But a very different UK emerged instead. Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979 heralded 18 years of radical Conservative economic policy. In 1997, when he was 77, the take of Britain's 1% had doubled to 12% of all national income. When Tom turned 87, after a decade of "New" Labour, the share of the best-off 1% had risen to over 15%, which meant that inequality

had returned to the levels they were when Tom was a very young man. Today the very best-off 1% in Britain receive around 14%, or a seventh of all income.

At the start of this century our leading politicians believed that the rich should be rewarded and the poor should be bullied. Though not very long from now, we may look back and see that it took the Covid-19 pandemic to bring to a halt the rise in economic inequality.

Though prime minister Boris Johnson likes to talk of “levelling up”, the coronavirus pandemic has instead resulted in a levelling down. Many Britons with no wealth will fall [further into debt](#) this year. Yet it’s estimated that a third of FTSE-100 companies have [cut their chief executive’s pay](#) as a result of the economic shutdown; anyone whose wealth is held in stocks and shares has seen it collapse in recent months; and house prices are falling, and are likely to fall the most where they were highest.



Captain Tom promoted to colonel on 100th birthday in flood of cards

Captain Tom's fundraising achievement, for which he has been [promoted to colonel](#), is a tribute to Britain's belief that our NHS is worth preserving. But charity efforts even of this magnitude can raise only a tiny fraction of the billion a week needed if the UK it is to fund its health services to the levels of Germany. Of all large European countries, it is Germany that has dealt with the pandemic the best.

At first, the economic impact of Covid-19 looks devastating. But think back to the first half-century of Tom's life. Think of how his situation changed from one in which living in poverty was very likely, through to a time when his children could expect to have well-paid jobs, enjoy full employment and start a family in their 20s if they wished.

The last time economic inequality began to fall in the UK was around the time Tom was born, at some point between 1913 and just after the end of the first world war. The war debts could only be repaid by taxing the rich; no one else had enough money. The same is likely to happen again today, with the debts of lockdown and global recession.

Coincidentally, a century after Captain Tom was born, the prime minister announced the [birth of his own son](#). But there is no need for Boris Johnson and Carrie Symonds' baby to live through such a rollercoaster century. We should learn from the past 100 years: pull inequality down, but this time keep it down.

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