

Dorling, D. (2023) Growth which makes everyone, not just a few, better off, Chapter 12 in G. Atherton and M. Le Chevallier (Eds.) How Can Labour Level Up?, Ealing: University of West London, Centre for Inequality and Levelling Up, 12 July, <https://www.uwl.ac.uk/research/research-centres-and-groups/centre-inequality-and-levelling-up>

Growth which makes everyone, not just a few, better off

Danny Dorling

In 2023, when discussing what might be possible with levelling up, Peter John quoted the July 2021 words of the Prime Minister said a year before he was forced to resign from office:

*'Johnson elaborated by focusing attention on his belief that potential and talent was spread evenly across the country. He said emphatically: "We don't want to level down. I don't believe ... that there is any basic difference in the potential of babies born across this country. Everyone knows that talent and energy and enthusiasm and flair are evenly spread across the UK...it is opportunity that is not..." He also added that such a condition was causing a massive waste of human resource as too many were failing to fulfil their latent ambitions. However, he purposefully did not link inequality in the UK to poor outcomes rather he stuck with the standard Conservative trope – improving opportunity.'*¹

Johnson had moved some distance from his 'top Cornflake' days,² but he, and many like him, hankered after holding onto a belief that some people had greater latent potential or ambitions than others, even if he was now will to conceded that perhaps this distribution was geographically more spread than he had once believed. In his belief in inherent differences between humans being of great consequence, Johnson was far from alone. The British Labour embedded eugenic beliefs in both in the original fundamental cause IV of its constitution and in the Blair rewrite which contained similar prejudices. The key text simply changed from 'workers by hand or by brain' [two types] to 'to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential' [a continuity of types with differing potentials].

A belief that chaps, and it was mainly chaps they were worrying about then, were born as babies with differing potentials served the British empire well. Some were born to lead, others to follow. In between a few had the potential to raises up a little in the ranks. Order was maintained and 170-odd current members of the United Nations were invaded or otherwise controlled, as another Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, pointed out. Interestingly, none of the 22 not invaded are included in the long list that Johnson insulted as Foreign Secretary.³

But why does any of this matter when it comes to levelling up? It matters because there is no Empire 2.0 coming. Because Britain is not going to level up by securing more overseas students for ever, or by turning its banks into even riskier casino type; the kind that would not be allowed to operate in the EU. Britain will not level up by introducing freeports or enticing car battery companies to come here. Britain will not level up by spending paltry sums and building a few ill thought out edifices for sitting MPs to be photographed next to in the hope that that might benefit in the next General Election. None of that will work. None of it is showing any signs of working.

More level, and today far more prosperous countries do not hold to British beliefs of inherent differences to anything like the same extent. Elsewhere, in the actual level sunny uplands, people think their children should go to the same schools, together. They believe that no one should be very badly paid and that it is repulsive to be too greedy. We once thought that too, from 1918 to 1978. But becoming level back then had been easier because of the final spoils of empire. It will be harder now.

The British have an excuse as to why they have reverted again to such weird ideas of inequality being good and ability being concentrated far more in some than others. The excuse is Britain's unusual history. When controlling the largest empire the world has even seen, it helps not to see those you control as like you. When you no longer have that empire to control, such thinking can be your greatest weakness. For those at the top, the rules are for the little people – people who can be given scraps. But it won't wash any more.

Labour need to stop thing like this too. Labour from 1945 to 1970 used the receipts of Empire attained advantage to level across. They convinced the Conservatives to copy suit. But when almost all of the last of the colonies gained their independence, the Conservatives shifted back again to promoting inequality, and Labour from 1997-2010 followed suit. Inequality never fell in any single one of the thirteen New Labour years, making it easier for the Conservatives to come up with their duplicitous levelling slogan.

In this context, the words of Keir Starmer, spoken in February 2023, sound hollow. He wanted: *'A collective ambition, a partnership – to secure the highest sustained growth in the*

*G7. With good jobs, productivity growth in every part of the country, growth which makes everyone, not just a few, better off.*⁴ If Labour continue to mimic the Conservatives. Or try to claim they can be better at being ‘true Conservatives’, they will be ridiculed. The pendulum has shifted again.

People cannot eat growth. They do not believe promises that economic growth will be their salvation any more. They have heard those promises so many times and know them to be false. Johnson’s 2022 promise that if we stayed close to his chosen path then soon: ‘... we will be the most prosperous in Europe.’ was almost identical to one given by George Osborne seven years earlier.⁵ The only difference being that Osborne had promised that the UK would soon be the richest of all larger nations in the world. The change over time in these promises is that they have been watered down from over one hundred ‘larger’ countries in the the world (Osborne) to less than three dozen in ‘Europe’ (Johnson), to just seven mature slow growing economies – ‘the G7’ (Starmer).

Neither Labour nor the Conservative can level up – but that is not what levelling is. Levelling is to make something more equal or similar, to create a flat and even surface. You do not level by piling on money you do not have to ignite a potential that is not there. You level by making flat that which is most egregious. You level the tax avoiders and evaders, the non-doms, the elite private schools that wish to retain the perks of registering as charities, the people who charge the heating bill for their swimming pools to expenses, and those who employ a household of personal servants.

When we last levelled we began at the top and we knocked it down. We did this in a polite British way. The country houses were ‘donated’ to the National Trust. We did it because we had to. And now we have to do it again. Only a fool would try to level the ground without first knocking down the outcrops that prevent it being level. It takes time to level properly, but it is the poor who benefit first and most quickly. Eventually even the rich do too, they are just often the last to realize it. No child should grow up surround by servants and told they have potential above others around them. It does them no favours in the long run.

¹ Page 10 of 2022: Levelling Up - What is it and can it work? Which can be found here:
<https://www.uwl.ac.uk/research/research-centres-and-groups/centre-inequality-and-levelling-ceilup>

And also to be found here:
https://www.uwl.ac.uk/sites/uwl/files/2022-01/CEILUP%20Report%20Levelling%20Up%20-%20What%20is%20it%20and%20can%20it%20work__0.pdf?_ga=2.130447695.1574683468.1643103399-1920473685.1641291448

² <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/28/boris-johnson-iq-intelligence-gordon-gekko>

³ <https://bigthink.com/strange-maps/a-world-map-of-boris-johnson-insults/>

⁴ <https://labourlist.org/2023/02/growth-is-the-answer-starmers-speech-on-labours-plan-for-the-economy/>

⁵ <https://www.dannydorling.org/?p=9467>

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‘Prime Minister Boris Johnson (right) with the leader of the Labour Party Sir Keir Starmer walk through the Members’ Lobby at the Palace of Westminster ahead of the State Opening of Parliament in the House of Lords, London (Toby Melville/PA) (PA Wire)’

Cost-of-living crisis more important than Partygate or Beergate – poll
Opinions of the Prime Minister and the Labour leader are more likely to be based on the cost of living than claims of lockdown breaches.

Christopher McKeon

The Independent, Thursday 12 May 2022

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/boris-johnson-partygate-prime-minister-ipsos-labour-b2077063.html>