

EQUALITY AS A SOCIAL OBJECTIVE

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I

BEFORE offering my contribution I should like to congratulate the Group upon its choice of subject for this series of discussions. Equality is a catchword of the day; the levelling spirit is a characteristic of the age. Other ideas which were part of the great leftward drive have been realised or have lost their attractive power. The gilt is off the nationalisation gingerbread. But not so with the idea of equality. Although, as I shall try to show, in some respects we have gone as far in that direction as a great many members of the left would, in their heads, judge to be desirable, that idea still retains its ascendancy over their hearts. Socialism is about equality, we are told by Professor Lewis. Mr. Kaldor's extraordinarily interesting book, *An Expenditure Tax*, is, to some extent at least, inspired by the same impulse. Equality as an objective still holds the field as one of the main issues of our time. Indeed, in some circles it is the basis for a sort of snobism; if you do not subscribe to the levelling slogans, you are in some sense morally inferior.

Now, if we are to discuss this issue in a realistic spirit, it is necessary to make distinctions. Equality as an objective may mean quite a number of different things; and unless these are clearly separated much confusion and argument at cross purposes is possible. It is very easy to generate an enormous head of emotional steam in favour of one kind of equality by arguments which are only relevant to another.

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"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil; but as an affirmative good."

—Eugene Black

For instance, it is not at all difficult to And people who speak as if the arguments against meting out different sentences to different people according to their race or the colour of their hair or skins furnished conclusive grounds for preventing one man from earning more than another. If you hold that it is unjust to prevent women entering learned professions on the same terms as men, you are expected. by that token, to believe also that it is unjust that different persons should own different amounts of property.

As I see things, we need therefore, from the outset, to distinguish between three very broad conceptions : equality before the law, equality of opportunity, and equality of income and wealth. In what I have to say here I shall be concentrating mainly on the last of these and its appropriate sub-divisions. But first I should like to say a word or two about each in regard to its status in the general debate.

II

- To begin, then, with equality before the law. I take it that, before a group such as this, there is no need to argue at length its general desirability. It would be going too far to say that, since the defeat of the Nazis, it is nowhere a controversial issue ; for there are still substantial areas where gross inequality in this respect not only still exists, but is also the subject of passionate intellectual—or would-be intellectual—apologia. I am sure that Dr. Verwoerd does not believe in this kind of equality. And even in the detailed working out of our own administrative arrangements, it is not difficult to think of cases where different people similarly situated have been the subject of different treatment—the whole sordid history of the anomalies of rent restriction, to the removal of which this group has made such a notable contribution, is full of examples of this kind. But I think it would be legitimate to say that, in this country at least, among men of goodwill, the general principle is not likely to be called in question.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps just as well to state explicitly the grounds of this belief ; for it is extraordinary

how much muddled thinking surrounds it. Therefore, let it be said, as distinctly as possible, that it does not depend in any way upon the assumption of any kind of biological equality. Neither plants nor animals reveal equality within species ; and it would be very extraordinary if the race of humans were to be an exception to this rule. And in fact common experience tells us that it is not so. We may well ascribe many differences between adults to nurture rather than nature ; and, as I shall argue shortly, we may resolve to do all that can reasonably be done to eliminate the causes of such inequalities. But I fancy that we deceive ourselves if we believe that these account for all, or even the greater part, of the actual differences we see. As every teacher knows, not all the education in the world, from the cradle onwards, will make firsts or even upper seconds of all his pupils : it is utterly amazing to me how it could even be thought otherwise.¹ If the entitlement to equal treatment before the law depended upon potential intellectual equality to the best, or even the average, of the human race, how many very deserving people would be left out !

No. The case for this kind of equality is, not that all apparent differences are artificial, but rather that the existence of law is a fundamental condition of a free, as distinct from an arbitrary, society, and that physical and intellectual differences are no justification for unequal treatment in this particular connection. The difference between Einstein and the hall porter affords no ground for treating them differently in regard either to punishment for crime, or enforcement of contractual obligations. When Paul III, after hearing report of one of Cellini's more atrocious misdeeds, is said to have said : "Learn that men, such as Benvenuto, unique in their profession, are not subject to the laws",² he was enunciating a principle which is the

¹ Yet both Adam Smith and J. S. Mill did think so. Adam Smith thought that at birth there was little difference between porters and philosophers (*Wealth of Nations*, Cannan's edition, vol. 1, p. 17). J. S. Mill thought that his own intellectual quality was entirely due to the education he had received from his father.

² *Memoirs*, Benvenuto Cellini, Everyman edition, p. 113.

exact contrary of the basis of a liberal society. How are we to tell which men are, and which are not, to be treated as "not subject to the laws"; and who is to bear such momentous responsibility ?

III

When we come to our next general conception, equality of opportunity, the position is not-so simple.

I think that most of us would be prepared to agree that, in itself, equality of opportunity is a very desirable objective. We should certainly think that it was most undesirable for a young person to be denied access to particular employments by some statutory or caste limitation ; for that would offend against the fundamental requirement of equality before the law. And I imagine that most of us would agree that it is an unfortunate thing if, by reason of family circumstance, one who is otherwise well equipped, is denied a chance to make good in competition with his fellows. We regard such a state of affairs as ethically undesirable ; moreover, we regard it as economically inefficient, in that it does not make the best use of scarce talent. Most of us are prepared to see quite extensive action by the state—more extensive indeed than takes place at present—to supplement family resources and family stimulus and create the conditions for la *carrière ouverte aux talents*. Those of us who spend our lives as teachers know well that this is one of our primary functions.

But while we regard it as desirable in itself and as a thoroughly worthwhile objective of policy, I am confident that a good many of us, at least, are not prepared to make it a sole objective. We want to see greater equality of opportunity. But we are not prepared to sacrifice everything else in the world to secure a complete realisation of this ideal.

It is worth while spelling this out a little ; for I think it points to a very important distinction of attitudes. It is plain, is it not, that even if there were no differences in pecuniary advantage between the position of the children

of different families, there would still prevail marked differences as regards advantages of atmosphere and enlightenment. The children of happy and sensible parents will usually have a better chance than the children of unhappy and stupid parents. Yet how many of us would be willing to destroy the institution of the family to rectify this inequality? Plato was : as you know, he was prepared to take infants from their parents at birth in order to eliminate any danger of unequal treatment. But the majority of even dyed-in-the-wool collectivists have hesitated to follow him thus far. They have normally been content to assume that, in this respect, they could both have their cake and eat it.

The abolition of the family is an extreme case ; and it would be a waste of time to pursue it further. But similar conflicts of objectives may arise in connections which have much more practical significance. Thus, even if there is what most of us would regard as adequate supplementation of family resources, there can be no doubt that it remains an advantage to have parents who are well off rather than parents who are not so well off. Now to a convinced collectivist this is yet another reason for a general approach to equalisation of property and wealth. But those who, for other reasons, do not believe such equalisation to be desirable, will not necessarily be moved for *this* reason to go further in this direction. They will say : we believe in such an approach to equality of opportunity as may be secured by reasonable supplements to family income ; but we are, not prepared to paralyse the whole apparatus of incentive and accumulation to eliminate such inequalities as remain when this has been done.

It is clear, therefore, that while there may be general agreement on the desirability of the end in itself, there is still considerable room for disagreement on the lengths to which we are disposed to go to achieve it in competition with other desirable ends

IV

When we come to our third basic conception, equality of income and wealth, matters are on a still different footing. Here it is not, as in the case we have just discussed,

a matter of probable agreement on a general objective, but disagreement on the lengths to which you should go to achieve it ; it is a matter, rather, of an objective whose intrinsic desirability may well be called in question by people who are quite as intelligent and sensitive as those who support it. You may not regard equality, either of income or of wealth or of both, as having in itself any strong claim on your sense of political obligation or expediency.

It will be well to split this matter up into appropriate sub-divisions in order to examine it in proper detail.

(a) Let us begin with equality of income ; and to eliminate all extraneous considerations, let us concentrate on income from work. "Unearned" income, or income from property, can more conveniently be dealt with when we are considering equality of wealth.

I wonder how many people at the present day do in fact regard strict equality of income from work as an objective which we should wish to realise, even if it were practicable. It is true that, in the past, quite a substantial number have adopted this attitude. When I was young and the hopes based upon the Communist revolution in Russia were at their height, I am sure that many would have formulated their ideal thus ; and Bernard Shaw (who, incidentally, spent his last years refusing to increase his dependants' wages to keep pace with the cost of living because he thought he himself was being taxed out of existence) argued strongly that way. But much has happened since then ; and I suspect that the number of supporters of exact equality — whatever that may mean — has somewhat diminished.

Speaking for myself, I must confess that I do not find it acceptable, either from the point of view of expediency or from the point of view of ultimate ethics.

From the point of view of expediency it is surely clear that a system which guaranteed the same reward to the industrious and to the idle, to the clever and to the stupid, would be a system which would be very much less productive than, in our present state of comparative poverty, any

sensible person would regard as satisfactory. I am not in the least arguing that the pecuniary incentive is the only incentive ; I am not denying that scientists and social reformers and others whose product is of great importance do much without much regard to financial reward. But I am arguing that the great majority of jobs have not such intrinsic interest and that you cannot assume that the workaday business of the world will get done very well without some connection, direct or indirect, between effort and reward. I think that the experience of the Russian experiment shows that this is at least as true of collectivist societies as it is of societies based on private property and the market.

But further, from the point of view of ultimate ethics, I do not find the objective at all compelling. I really cannot see anything particularly ethically attractive in a total divorce between earnings and the pecuniary value of contribution to the social product ; and I find something positively incompatible between the objective of equal opportunity, which I support, and the objective of equal reward, which I reject. Equal opportunity to win equal prizes — has that really a very strong appeal to the candid intellect or the fastidious social conscience ?

(b) Let us turn then from earnings to wealth and the income which may accrue from the possession thereof. What of the egalitarian ideal here ?

Now nothing can be more certain than that, if any private accumulation out of earnings be permitted, there will emerge some inequality of possessions ; and further that, if investment of such accumulation takes place, there will arise some inequality of income therefrom. This would obviously happen even if all private property reverted to the state at death. Different people have different dispositions to save. If there is inequality of earning, different people will have different ability to save ; and once saving has taken place, different forms of property will undergo different vicissitudes of valuation. If there is transmission of property at death, then there will be further possibilities of inequality : different people will enter into different inheritances. But the main point should be clear : once

private property is allowed at all, some degree of inequality is more or less inevitable. Equality all round all the time would be the most unlikely fluke. If, therefore, you believe in private property on any substantial scale, if you think, as I do, that it safeguards liberty and decentralised initiative, you are *ipso facto* committed to a social objective which involves some negation of the objective of equality.

It is considerations of this sort which so frequently have led thoroughgoing egalitarians to advocate the complete or the virtual abolition of private property. Whether or not total collectivism would secure a better organisation of production, at least, they argue, it would prevent the existence of inequality of private wealth. Let justice be done even if the heavens fall. If, however, you believe that collectivism of this sort will not be very efficient, still more if you believe that such a concentration of power in the hands of the rulers of monolithic states means the elimination of political liberty and the probable disappearance of spontaneity and truth—a fear which has much empirical verification—you may easily think the remedy to be much worse than the disease, and revise your views regarding economic equality as an objective.

All this, however, relates to logical extremes. In fact, at the present day it is doubtful whether the majority of the left would be willing to shape their ideals so severely. They may continue to get a considerable release of the soul from the reiteration of the traditional slogans. But if they are challenged as I have challenged them now, of course they will strongly reproach you for assuming that they ever meant anything, so crude. They are prepared to admit the necessity of some connection between earnings and output. They will admit the necessity, even under collectivist institutions, for some degree of private saving. Even in Russia some degree of transmission of property at death is permitted.

So that in the end the problem of practical politics, at any rate in the contemporary situation, is not a matter of total equality or not, but rather how much equality to aim at, or how much inequality to permit, in regard to particular kinds of income or wealth. This is perhaps a less exciting

question. But, as we shall see, it affords ample scope for discussion and disagreement.

v

Before examining particular cases, let us pause a little to clear our minds about the general aspects of the more limited objective now in view. Given that complete equality of income and wealth is—to use Bentham's phrase—chimerical and undesirable, to what extent do we support the reduction of inequality as a general objective?

This is not a question to which cut and dried answers are possible in the sense in which we could give cut and dried answers to our earlier questions. This is because, while equality in this sense is a conception of a unique relationship, there are almost an infinite variety of possible patterns of inequality—and the probability is that you will regard some as tolerable and others as not.

Nevertheless, I think it is not impossible to reach certain general positions, testing our reactions as we go by reference to contemporary reality.

In the first place, I would say that, in an economy such as ours, most of us would approve of measures designed to relieve extreme poverty and distress. We approve too, for reasons I have already discussed, of extensive measures designed to increase equality of opportunity by supplementation of family income for purposes of education and health. All such measures have a tendency to greater quality of income per head; and although this is not necessarily their *raison d'être*, we certainly do not disapprove of them for this reason. Needless to say, levelling-up measures of this sort present great problems in detail about which men of goodwill may easily differ. But the desirability of the general tendency is not seriously questioned.

It is far otherwise when we come to measures which have the specific intention of reducing inequality by levelling down. On this matter, I think, there is considerable clarification to be achieved by some brief meditation on the general idea of progressiveness in taxation.

As I see it, this idea can be recommended on either one

of two grounds—as a means of sharing a common burden or as a means of reducing inequality. These grounds are quite distinct and the difference between them involves a whole world of difference as regards political attitudes.

Thus the idea of Progression as a means of burden-sharing seems to me quite acceptable to a non-collectivist attitude. Given the usefulness of the public expenditure to be financed, I see no objection in principle to sharing the burden in this way. Even the firmest supporters of the proportional principle—J. S. Mill, for example—are usually prepared to concede an exemption limit—and of course proportionality above such a limit arithmetically involves general progression. Progression of this kind and for this purpose seems to me good ethics and common sense; and to support it for this reason does not in the least rule out discussion of what degree of progressiveness is expedient in the light of considerations of incentive.

In contrast to this, Progression specifically designed to reduce inequality seems to rest upon a much more dubious footing.

I do not think we should say that in principle this is always unacceptable. It is not impossible to think of patterns of inequality so gross that some reduction by way of taxation is politically desirable. But in general I confess that the idea does not have for me any strong ethical compulsion—rather the contrary. The levelling-down impulse seems to me to be often associated with a state of mind which I find ethically displeasing. The citizen, still more the politician, who is always thinking of relativities is not a particularly edifying spectacle. What is there specially admirable, I ask, about taking away proportionately more of a man's earnings just because the work he does happens to be more highly paid? Is there not something slightly incongruous about society offering, through the market, one rate of pay, and then, through the tax machine, reducing it, not just incidentally in the course of financing necessary services, but deliberately and of set purpose because the rate is thought to be too high?

This is not to say in the least that I attach ultimate importance to the values of the market. I do not think,

for instance, that a member of the academic profession is ethically or socially inferior because his salary ceiling is usually under, say, 53000 a year, while film stars and boxers can sometimes make thirty or forty times that amount. But I do not think he should resent their being able to do so. And my impression is that there is not all that resentment among the wage-earning part of the electorate. It is the finical intellectuals, often themselves living comfortably on inherited investment income, who are continually looking around for something to worry about.

Beyond that, since I am revealing to you a somewhat unregenerate frame of mind, I might as well confess that I take no pleasure in the more general effects of the degree of progression now prevailing. Some, whom I respect, may enjoy the idea of the tremendous reduction which has taken place in the numbers of higher incomes. But if I think of it in terms of concrete results, the appearance of the consumption pattern, the colour of town and country, the narrowing of the scope for variety and experiment, I do not share this feeling. I do not suggest for a moment that the finer values of civilisation depend only on the expenditure of the higher income groups: that would be not only an oversimplification but even a positive misrepresentation. But a good deal still does so depend; and I view with some apprehension the continuance of a state of affairs where the sources of private patronage for the more unusual and unpopular forms of art and learning have reached so low an ebb as they have to-day. At present levels of productivity at least, there is a certain drabness implicit in the operation of the levelling process.

VI

Let us now address ourselves to specific tendencies and problems. So far as income is concerned—there will be more to say of wealth hereafter—I am fairly clear that not much more levelling is politically practicable in this country. Surtax rates in the upper reaches are almost at the limit of levelling vindictiveness—you cannot take much more than nineteen shillings in the pound. And be-

low these levels, in a society increasingly dependent on managers and technicians, the position is already politically awkward. Indeed, if you look at comparative graphs of direct tax rates in this and other Western countries, it is clear that we have gone farther down the egalitarian road than any other important country — and I, for one, should be inclined to predict some eventual reaction. It is difficult to believe that differential incentives can be maintained so much less than elsewhere under capitalism — to say nothing of Soviet Russia?

The main proposals for further change which come from the egalitarian camp relate to expense allowances and to capital gains.

So far as expense allowances are concerned, my attitude is one of some reserve. I do not doubt that there are abuses — although the extent and area can be considerably exaggerated — and in principle this cannot be approved: it offends against one of the good canons of equality — equality before the law. But it is surely very obvious that, in part at any rate, the root cause of the abuses is to be found in the penal tax-rates. The majority of men are not angels; if they feel they are unjustly dealt with, they will lose their scruples against acting unjustly. This certainly is true of wage earners. I see no reason to be surprised that it applies also to business executives.

The position as regards capital gains is more difficult. I do not see any justification for denying that, in principle, the immunity of capital gains under our tax law is something of an anomaly. Nor, in the light of American practice, is it reasonable to argue that taxation of capital gains is incompatible with the efficient working of an individualist society. But I should be sorry to see the anomaly removed while our general rates of direct taxation remain so high. The prospect of capital gains is one of the incentives which are still an effective spur to enterprise. And while it is difficult to overstate the administrative nuisance which would be involved in bringing capital gains into our

¹I have left this passage as it was written in 1956. Since then the prediction has begun to be justified.

tax system, it is very easy to exaggerate the yield. Extensive capital gains of the kind we have seen in recent years are essentially a by-product of inflation. Get rid of inflation, administer the system with equity, and I suspect it might well be thought that financially it was not worth the candle.

In brief, while I am sure there will continue to be a good deal of sound and fury on the income front, I do not think that we are likely to go much further in the way of general levelling. But, of course, from my point of view, that is not enough. From my point of view some delevelling is desirable. The present degree of progression is too great. Present incentives are not sufficient to secure a desirable rate of increase of productivity? Talent tends to migrate. It is obvious that we are not going to return to the easy conditions of earlier periods. But some reversal of present trends seems to be called for.

VII

When we turn from the field of annual income to that of ownership or wealth, we are confronted with a very different situation. We have seen already that the non-collectivist is unwilling to abolish private property, either in the interests of greater equality of opportunity or in the interests of preventing inequality at all. But it is not true that he is unwilling to do anything at all to affect the pattern of distribution. The fact that human beings die and that the transmission of their property at death necessarily involves very complicated legal arrangements, offers an opportunity for producing modifications of ownership which need not blunt unduly either the incentive to work or to save, but which, by a gentle and continuous process, may produce a desirable redistribution. The great social

¹The disincentive effects of high marginal rates are sometimes called in question. But this does not seem to me to make sense. If we could not argue that it made no difference if the marginal rate were 20s. in the pound, so that there was no reward for additional risk and effort, why should we speak as if the position is so radically changed when the residue from a pound's worth of earnings is 6d. or 1s.?

philosophers of the nineteenth century, who worked out the rationale of a free enterprise system based on private Property and the market, themselves conceived this possibility and laid some emphasis upon it. A tax upon inheritance, graduated according to the size of the legacy, would involve a strong incentive to the diffusion of property ; the more a testator divided his estate, the less total tax it would have to bear.

'Such an arrangement seems to me to have much to recommend it. Far from destroying the institution of property, it tends to sustain it by causing property to be more widely diffused. And by causing it to be more widely diffused, it tends also to increase equality of opportunity without imposing limitations on the area of ownership or disincentives to work and save. It is surely a plan which is in full harmony with the spirit of a property-awning democracy.

But it is not a plan which is at present being carried out. Death duties at the present time are based, not on the size of the legacy received, but rather on the size of the total estate of the testator ; and at present rates of taxation, while they certainly have the effects of destroying large accumulations, they have no effect whatever in promoting their diffusion, save in so far as they stimulate gifts inter vivos. The main effect of estate duty on the present scale is to transfer property to the state, which treats it as current revenue—which is the reverse of what a non-collectivist would wish. It is difficult to exaggerate the cumulative influence of this continuous attrition. It is the great revolution of our time—a revolution under anaesthesia.

I confess that I have never been able to understand why Ministers who are not Socialists have never done anything to alter this system. It certainly cannot be said that the alternative plan is administratively impossible, since for years, in a small way, it was part of the system. Admittedly it is somewhat more difficult to administer. But, given the minimum desideratum of practicability, the criterion of policy is not administrative ease ; rather it is conformity to the wishes of Ministers and the broad objectives of social policy.

Nor should there be any fear based upon considerations of general financial stability. At present rates, the estate duty must be paid overwhelmingly out of capital; any fall of tax receipts which was due to assessment on the new basis, would mean chiefly a release of 'savings for other purposes. There can, therefore, be no reason, save an utter indifference to the long-run effects of day-to-day policy, which has prevented non-Socialist Governments from making the change.

VIII

In conclusion, may I say one more word about tendencies and the climate of opinion. Much of my analysis this evening has been negative and critical. Does this mean that, whenever I hear a man praising the objective of equality in general terms, I am automatically out of sympathy ?

Not at all. Equality before the law is one of the most precious elements in the Western tradition. It was achieved by our forefathers only after long and bitter struggles ; and the practice of the totalitarian states of our own age shows that we can by no means afford to take it for granted. Equality of opportunity is a fine objective—spacious, generous, life-creating. The fact that we are not prepared to jettison everything else to get it, does not mean that we do not value it, or that we are not prepared to strive most earnestly to achieve it in a less destructive way.

For the rest, in the sphere of income and wealth; we may oppose, as I most certainly oppose, the prevalent tendency to level down just for the sake of levelling. But if we are to be fair, we must recognise that it does not all spring from envy and resentment, powerful and widespread as these motives may be. A sensitive man will regret the false values which are often associated with inequality. A man of liberal spirit will find his greatest fulfilment in the society of his equals—or his betters. That men should treat him as a superior is something that he will not want.—rather the contrary ; and he will instinctively dislike anything which tends to artificial hierarchy.

All of this, I think, should command our sympathy and understanding. The difference between those of us who reject the collectivist solution and those who support it *for these reasons*, is not that we do not share their distaste for the false values, but rather that we think they are better eliminated another way. In our conception, the things which men of good-will on both sides deplore are better dealt with by attacks on particular abuses and by remedies for particular deficiencies, than by general solutions which, however laudable the intentions behind them, would have the effect of clamping society into a strait-jacket in which just those virtues which we most seek to foster would have the least chance of survival.

A NOTE ON THE TAXATION OF MARRIAGE

I am tempted to add to the general reflections on taxation included in the above paper a few paragraphs on the tax on marriage involved in our present arrangements, which first appeared in an article which I wrote for *Lloyds Bank Review* in 1955, entitled 'Notes on Public Finance':

The position under our present tax laws of married persons with independent incomes which add up to more than a certain figure is an anomaly to which attention has frequently been drawn: they would be better off if they lived together without being married. This, of course, is a direct effect of progression; under a strictly proportionate tax, it would be a matter of indifference whether incomes were aggregated or not. It is a somewhat surprising circumstance, in a community professing respect for the institution of matrimony, that it has been tolerated for so long. For it is in fact a direct tax on marriage—to be more precise, on marriage among the rather better-off middle classes.

[*The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise.*]

"Free Enterprise was born with man and
shall survive as long as man survives."

—A. D. Shroff

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