Another voice

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Matthew Parris

From John Humphrys on the Today programme to leading articles in quality newspapers to anxious speeches by politicians, the growing gap between the poorest in Britain, and the rest, has become a serious talking-point this summer. The gap appears to be more than a gap in income, but in aspiration, self-esteem and social mobility too. It seems a minority of our fellow-citizens are simply getting stuck — by the wayside, going nowhere, left behind. And the chances of their children escaping, or they in later life escaping, the same fate look statistically as slim as or slimmer than ever.

I was particularly struck by a visit (or revisit) John Humphrys paid to a deprived neighbourhood in his native South Wales: Pearl Street in Cardiff. The broadcaster reflected sadly on the contrast between the lack of self-respect and mutual respect, and of ambition, he encountered this time, and the proud and self-reliant working-class society he remembered from his youth: a working class from which he had the impression that there seemed more ladders out than today.

Powerful stuff. And one cannot gainsay direct experience and recollection like that, any more than one can ignore statistics which do show — in Polly Toynbee's vivid imagery — a desert crossing in which a minority of the caravan are falling ever-further behind the main group. But I wonder whether, in talking of a change over the last half-century, we are comparing like with like. And I wonder too whether, perverse as this may sound, the plight of the poorest in modern Britain is a result of,

rather than a reproach to, social mobility.

Let me explain. Half a century ago the working class or proletariat — however one chose to define them, and definitions varied — were surely something close to half the population or more. In a much more real sense than today they were a community, or string of communities. No sense of human or social failure hung above them; to be among them was to be among a mainstream. As in any thriving, self-confident and culturally rich community, people respected each other and looked after each other. The existence of social barriers (though permeable) to upward mobility sharpened self-definition and a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. A wide range of intelligence and capability was accommodated, from greatest to least, and there was a place for all. Plenty of people in the working class were cleverer and more capable than plenty in the middle or upper classes, and knew it. Your class-affiliation was not a grading of calibre, character or talent. The same, incidentally, could also be said of the upper classes, where even the dimmest and most useless were found a place, some of them (as my late father used bitterly to lament) on the boards of banks and corporations. They were not allowed to sink to their natural level, which might have been under the arches at Charing Cross.

I am not defending such social arrangements — I dislike class — but pointing out that clear social stratification on a basis other than merit does tend to generate a sort of 'inclusiveness' within each class, even while making differences between classes. Each class looked after its own, a city-state within a nation, with protective walls; and though citizens were able to pass through the city gates and join other classes, the majority which stayed behind them was in no sense left behind.

It may be wrong, therefore, to approach those at the bottom of the heap in 2007 as though they are the 21st-century equivalent of the post-second-world-war working class; and then bewail the demoralisation and hopelessness one encounters among them, comparing it with old-fashioned working-class pride, and the millions who made their way from that social base 'upward' in the world.

I'm fighting shy, while seeking to take the argument on to its next step, of a word it's going to be hard to avoid. This is the word 'residue'. I am uncomfortable with it. It sounds hopeless. No individual should be described in this way. Everyone is unique, with gifts and possibilities. And it is a harsh thing to seem to denigrate an entire group as intrinsically dysfunctional. But anyone familiar with neighbourhoods (such as one I have in mind, know quite well, but will not name) where for many years anyone with any get-up-and-go has got up and gone, will recognise the reinforcing effect on a community of a communal sense of failure coupled with the voluntary removal of individuals who do not fail. One may be left with the old, the chronically ill or disabled, the mentally ill, drug addicts and alcoholics, and a fair sprinkling of inadequates and low-grade criminals. A friend who works in re-education and vocational training calls this the 'pistachio-nut syndrome': the process by which as nuts with crackable shells are selected and eaten, the concentration at the bottom of the bowl of a shrinking minority of tooth-breaking dud nuts increases towards 100 per cent.

Communities can be like this. The group we are talking about when we speak of 'Britain's poor' — representatives of whom Mr Humphrys met in Cardiff — is surely much, much less numerous than what we used to understand by expressions like

'the working class'. All definition is fluid and subjective, but on any definition today's group — which some, like Anatole Kaletsky in the Times, call the 'underclass', and which we sense are marginalised, excluded, almost outcasts — cannot amount to more than 15 per cent of the population and may be closer to 5 per cent, one in 20. They are neither the equivalent of nor the successors to the old British working class. My guess is that they are tending to bunch ever closer together into sink estates and 'social' housing, or being driven there. Thus have grown quite concentrated pockets, often quite small, of deprivation.

And what, in part, keeps them there is a dynamic which we might call an unintended side-effect of increased social mobility. People with any drive, capable and motivated people, can find their natural level in our less classbound society. They move on, and up; they move away. They are tied neither to class nor locality. Over time this tends to intensify the concentration of human hopelessness into the small areas that already started deprived and become more so.

If I were to go on to remark that those left in these social sinks will tend to intermarry — or at least interbreed — and to revisit upon the next generation the dysfunction of their own, I fear I would be straying into the territory that so memorably destroyed the late Keith Joseph's prospects of leadership. So I will not. But the thought troubles me.

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