

A duty on public bodies to tackle socio-economic disadvantage?

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What if discrimination on the grounds of social class were illegal? Would this help to reduce poverty? Would it signal a revolution in access to services, income distribution, and more generally in government priorities? So many outcomes are highly associated with social class, including health, employment and the length of life itself.

But this is the possibility, albeit in muted form, when the Equalities Bill is debated in Parliament this year. The need to monitor services and social conditions by social class as well as race, age, sex, disability and sexual orientation has its statistical requirements.

The White Paper 'New Opportunities' published in 2008 declared that the government was

".. considering legislating to make clear that tackling socioeconomic disadvantage and narrowing gaps in outcomes for people from different backgrounds is a core function of key public services. This could take the form of a new strategic duty on central departments and key public services to address the inequality that arises from socioeconomic disadvantage and place this objective at the core of their policies and programmes." (para 1.59, p22)

This 'strategic duty' is likely to be included in the Equalities Bill, which is intended to provide an over-arching framework for government policy on inequality and discrimination. Socio-economic disadvantage has been slipped in to the Bill without formal public discussion. Minister Harriet Harman has talked the good talk of 'narrowing the gap between rich and poor, and has persuaded the Cabinet to include 'inequalities arising from socio-economic disadvantage', although only as a duty on central government and key strategic public bodies. It is not proposed that an individual could go to law claiming discrimination on grounds of social class as with race or gender; but a government department could be called to task for policies that increased income inequalities. It raises the possibility that the Treasury could be criticised in courts for regressive taxation, or for depriving poor communities of bus services if it could be shown that this made their residents poorer.

The provisions in the Bill are likely to be vague and undefined because of opposition from government departments to anything that would show current practice in a bad light. They may be ditched altogether after Parliamentary debate. All the more reason to give the parliamentarians who might support it arguments of how useful it might be and how it might work in practice.

The Bill will not define socio-economic disadvantage, but is likely to be interpreted as parental occupation in unskilled work, lack of employment, or residence in areas identified as poor by the official Indices of Deprivation. It could lead to an industry of social inequality audits nationally and locally. It will certainly lead to the suggestion that government procurement and investment should lead to lower income inequalities, whether through reduced mega-pensions to bankers, or through raised wages for cleaners.