

‘It doesn’t make sense: sometimes they pull buildings down and then don’t do anything with the space, and sometimes they build on the parks. I’d like them to make a park where there isn’t any broken glass and that you don’t have to go under the motorway to get to,’

Stacey, 14

BOB HOLMAN

Number 2

A Vision from Easterhouse

The new Millennium offers all of us an opportunity to redress the imbalance that exists in British society: to show a bias towards the poor

The invitation to write this piece reached our flat in Glasgow in June 1999. As I read the news of the month, I perceived much of what I dislike about Britain. The media was full of the wedding of Edward Windsor and Sophie Rhys-Jones. It was announced that they had been given the titles, 'Their Royal Highnesses The Earl and Countess of Wessex'. Why? This couple appear to have no outstanding abilities. They were not elected. The explanation is that they are who they are by an accident of birth. Edward has inherited titles and power. Such a situation is an affront to democracy.

In times gone by, Labour leaders like Keir Hardie and George Lansbury spoke out passionately against an hereditary monarchy. Today New Labour ministers are as infatuated with royalty as the Conservatives are. In June, the Government gave a clear signal of its support for the House of Lords: Tony Blair dished out titles to a number of his followers. New Labour may have made a commitment to reforming the hereditary principle in the Lords, but it does not appear to feel any need to ensure that the members of the upper house are democratically elected. As things stand, those members will continue to owe their positions to patronage; they will also presumably be happy to continue having public money spent on maintaining the comfort of their surroundings in the upper house and on keeping up their excessive attendance allowances.

Other news items in June illustrated the vast inequalities that exist in this country. Elton John was shown to possess a fortune of £160 million and to have spent £250,000 a week with credit cards. Jack Cunningham, the former Minister for the Cabinet Office, so

shocked civil servants with his extravagance while on official business that one of them leaked details of his stay in a £1,000-a-night hotel along with a visit to a game reserve. Tony Blair was preparing to take his family for another holiday in a luxury villa in Italy. New Labour advisors received substantial hikes in their salaries – one worth £4,000 a year. In the same month, I had to help a working mother with a large family who had turned to a loan shark to buy household goods. Her wage is £123 a week. I purchased trainers for some kids who had no shoes. I read that 35 per cent of British households cannot afford a holiday away from home.

On 14 June the *Daily Mail* published an article by the Prime Minister in which he condemned young single mothers as a threat to family life and as a drain on the public purse. Noticeably, he does not condemn the morals of tax evasion by the wealthy. The poor are despised in Britain. To its credit, the Government has established a Social Exclusion Unit. But excluded from the Unit's 12 members is anyone on a low income. In June, I also watched *Question Time* on BBC television. All the panel members came from the privileged and powerful classes. There is a bias against the poor. They are excluded from any control over and participation in the decisions that shape their lives. When you consider this in conjunction with the huge material inequalities that they are faced with, it is surely no surprise to learn that, according to the Government's Urban Task Force (chaired by Lord Rogers), British cities have the deepest social divisions in western Europe. A divided society.

Britain is marred by a lack of democracy, by the oppression of poor people. So what? My objections spring from my Christian socialism. I believe God created all people of equal value: it follows that all people should be given the opportunity to contribute to the shape of our society and, in particular, that anyone who holds a position of power, responsibility or privilege should be elected to

that position. I believe God made all people of equal worth: it follows that the resources of the earth should be distributed as equally as possible. I am sure that God, in the person of Christ, displayed a particular concern for the poor. And I see democratic socialism as the political means most likely to build a society consistent with these beliefs.

At present, Britain contains two, very different kinds of estates. There are the estates of royalty, the Lords and politicians, all of which are sustained by a seemingly limitless flow of wealth; and then there are the other ones. In Easterhouse, in Glasgow, where I work, more than 80 per cent of the school children qualify for clothing grants – that is, they come from families with very low incomes. This is an estate which is in dire need of any wealth it can get its hands on.

What it does have, though, is a fair number of small neighbourhood groups, set up by the inhabitants themselves to help meet the needs of their own community – and it is these which I have put at the heart of my vision for the Millennium. One of the groups, FARE (Family Action in Rogerfield & Easterhouse), is based in five flats that became hard-to-lets following drug deaths within them. FARE runs activities for more than 300 children a week, a breakfast club, a café, education classes for adults and so on.

In June, I attended its monthly management committee, the members of which are elected by residents. We discussed the forthcoming holidays for 100 children: grants had been obtained to subsidise them. We regretted that FARE could no longer afford and in fact had had to sell its caravan, which for years had provided cheap holidays for families. And so back to the perennial subject of finance.

FARE has six excellent staff – including two lone parents who can work because the project is on their doorstep. The group

receives no money from local or central government to help pay its staff's low salaries, and could not survive without the backing of sympathetic charitable trusts. The committee members are local people who receive no payments and will never get establishment gongs. They come because they are committed to their community and because they have a bias towards the poor. I have found something very precious among the committee, the staff and users of FARE. Theirs is a fellowship derived from acting together for the well-being of others.

My vision for Millennium Britain is threefold:

■ I want a more *democratic* society. I hope that the monarchy is abolished in the early years of the Millennium. A Christian opposed to the royal family? Of course. The Bible reveals a God who reluctantly allowed his people to have kings. Later they were removed because of their arrogance and their disregard for the oppressed. If the British royals were sent packing, then the hereditary principle would be undermined, the principle of democracy would be strengthened, and the royal family's huge wealth could be redistributed among the poor.

■ I want a Britain *without* the House of Lords. If a second chamber is required then it ought to be an elected body. Not least, the abolition of appointed peers would end the sycophancy towards the establishment displayed by those who covet the glory of ermine and titles.

■ I want a more *equal* society. I won't live to see it but I long for a Britain in which the current huge and brutal material differences are reduced. I propose the introduction of a maximum income, so that no one will be able to earn more than three times what anyone else earns. I look forward to a society in which all are in decent homes, in which all children are properly fed. A society in which all families will be able to afford recreation

without recourse to charitable subsidies – not one in which the privileged few own holiday homes, enjoy leisure on their own boats and pilot planes for pleasure. Greater equality, far from making people into uniform robots, will release the creative abilities of millions of socially deprived citizens. As people draw closer together in terms of incomes and possessions, so they will draw closer together in fellowship. A more united, less divisive Britain.

Above all, then, I want a more *participative* Britain. OK, I dream. But this is a piece about a vision. In reality, I recognise that there is not any immediate prospect of a more democratic and equal society. New Labour is taking us into the new Millennium and it will do nothing to offend royalty; it is opposed to making even the fat cats – those with annual incomes of more than £70,000 – pay more income tax.

That said, the governments of the early years of the new era might allow a more participative society. FARE is only one example of a neighbourhood group. There are thousands of other small, struggling projects. Participation is the key word. It means that the project staff are locals, who live in the area, rather than professionals who commute in and out of it. It means these staff can make a long-term commitment, not simply put in a three-year stint. It means, too, the promotion of values and practices involving altruism, service and collectivity. It often results in disadvantaged individuals becoming stronger people as they contribute to their neighbourhood.

The trouble is that neighbourhood groups are largely unrecognised and under-financed. Last year saw the establishment of the Millennium Promise Fund, an initiative organised by business firms, under which employees throughout the country were encouraged to donate the earnings of their last hour's work

in 1999. However, none of the proceeds of this fund is due to go directly to neighbourhood groups; instead, the financial flow will be towards the national, multimillion-pound voluntary bodies (bodies like Barnardo's, which already has an annual income of £109 million and net assets of £196 million). Why does central government refuse to finance independent local projects run by poor people?

In order to facilitate a more participative Millennium, my proposal is that the Government should establish and finance a National Neighbourhood Fund. The Fund would allocate cash to Neighbourhood Trusts, which would give grants to existing and new locally controlled neighbourhood groups in deprived areas. Residents from these areas would elect members of the Trusts. The Trusts in their turn would elect members of the Fund committee. The outcomes would be as follows:

- Greater participation among the residents of deprived areas in neighbourhood groups as existing ones expand and new ones are started.
- More power to low-incomed citizens as they become involved in bodies which decide who and what should receive grants.
- Better services as groups receive stable funding.
- More jobs in places of high unemployment as neighbourhood groups take on more local staff.

Politics is not just about government. Whatever governments decide about greater democracy, equality and participation in the New Millennium, we as individuals can live the kinds of lives which support these ends.

First, we can refuse to take incomes which are above the national average. In short, we can reject inequality.

Second, we can decline to seek advancement or honours by

currying favour with the political, lordly or royal establishments. In short, we can reject patronage, which is the foe of democracy.

Third, we can dwell alongside citizens who are in the greatest social need: send our children to their schools, use their shops, identify with their neighbourhood groups, and enjoy their fellowship. In short, we can display a bias towards the poor.

This collective action with poor people must not be done in a patronising or controlling manner. Such impositions are likely to offend residents and to decrease their participation. Rather it has to be done gradually and with a commitment to staying. The approach is best summed up in what Jesus Christ called 'servanthood'. If many more individuals adopted these attitudes and practices then they might become a movement which would challenge the prevailing vices of selfishness, greed and arrogance. If the movement became widespread, then even the Government would have to take note.

The case for living according to principles does not win political or media attention. Politicians like Lord Hattersley write reams about the virtues of equality but not a word about how their beliefs affect their own personal behaviour. Indeed, Hattersley, when an MP, was revealed to be top of the pile in terms of his outside earnings – which amounted to £104,300, in addition to his pay and expenses as an MP. Champagne socialists sometimes justify their hypocrisy on the grounds that individual actions cannot alter social malaises. I find this an illogical cop-out. The implication is that, while believing in greater equality, we can still take huge incomes, accumulate possessions and distance ourselves from poor people and so adopt all the practices which reinforce inequality. If I am opposed to the taking of hard drugs, it is not sufficient to write articles suggesting national policies to counter them – I must refrain from taking drugs myself. In like manner, if we desire a society based on equality, democracy

and the end of social divisions then we must live lives which express these values. Unless individuals live differently, the new Millennium will be no better than the old.

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