

## Narrowing the class divide?

In a move described allegedly by a cabinet minister as 'socialism in one clause', the government looks set to introduce law to require public bodies to tackle social and economic inequality. Harriet Harman QC, in her capacity as Secretary of State for Equality, is leading the public debate for the move. Predictably, some sections of the media have come out strongly against the proposal, arguing that the government is declaring 'war on the middle class'. LAG believes that what is being proposed in the white paper, *New opportunities: fair chances for the future*, is rather moderate and should enjoy support from across the political spectrum, that is, if MPs are serious about striving to create a fairer society.

The issue of class is always a subject fraught with controversy. These days in political discourse any mention of class is avoided. Less precise phrases like 'hard-working families' or 'ordinary folk' are used by politicians as a cipher for the term 'the working class'. Primarily, this is because in the last century the traditional working class, which can be defined as those people in manual occupations, moved from being the majority of the population (75 per cent in the 1900s) to making up a minority of around 38 per cent of the population today. In the same period, the number of people in professional and management occupations grew from eight per cent to 34 per cent of the population. Politicians are therefore wary of alienating the majority of voters who might not identify themselves as working class. There is growing evidence though that social mobility in the UK has stalled. This has led to calls for the law to be used to ensure that working-class people are given better life chances.

The white paper, which was published in January, stated that the government was considering legislating to make it the duty of all public authorities to tackle socio-economic disadvantage by 'narrowing gaps in outcomes for people from different backgrounds'. Unless the government has a last-minute loss of nerve, the Equality Bill, which is due to be published this month, will include such a provision. LAG would welcome this move.

It could be argued that working-class people suffer direct

discrimination, for example, the catchment areas of schools with good examination results often exclude poorer neighbourhoods. This exclusion leads to a middle-class bias in a school's intake. There is also the derogatory rhetoric in the media and elsewhere of labelling working-class people 'chavs'; however, a directly enforceable right not to be discriminated against on the ground of class is not what the government is proposing. The Equality Bill's provisions will be aimed at the strategic level of the planning of public services.

A policy paper published by the Government Equalities Office on the proposed duty on public bodies to tackle socio-economic inequality was discussed at a meeting held last month. The paper gave examples of how the government envisages the duty would work in practice: picking up on the question of schools' application processes, it discusses authorities changing the accessibility of the information they provide to encourage parents who are socio-economically disadvantaged to apply to schools in their area. In another example, the paper discusses inequalities in access to sports and leisure opportunities, and how a local council could require service providers to meet targets for people from deprived wards to use leisure facilities. The paper is clear in ruling out people having a direct right to force public bodies to rethink decisions on the ground that they have been discriminated against because of their class.

LAG is sceptical that this proposed duty amounts to 'socialism in one clause'. Throughout the 20th century, governments on the left and right of the political divide have aimed to improve social mobility, though they have often differed on the means to do so. What the white paper proposes will require decision-makers to consider how they will bring this about and make sure that everyone, regardless of class, has equal access to services, and where necessary come up with solutions to remove barriers to achieving this.

Many legal aid clients are poor and disadvantaged, and these problems can be alleviated by access to legal services. For LAG, the interesting question is to what degree will the proposed legislation allow for independent, judicial scrutiny of public authorities' decisions? The danger is that without this capacity, many public bodies will pay only lip service to the duty. We would argue that if progress on social mobility continues to be low, a future government should consider introducing directly enforceable rights linked to social class.

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