**Potential title: “Burning injustices”: Progress on social inequalities under Theresa May?**

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It has been a year since Theresa May came to power on 13th July 2016. On her first day in power, she gave a rather striking speech in Downing Street about the inequality and “*burning social injustice”* she saw in the UK. There have been a particularly large number of events over the past twelve months, the Prime Minister has had many calls on her attention, and it is quite feasible that there will be a different PM by the time you read this. However, if you are serious about social justice, you must, in the words of the US civil rights song, ‘keep your eyes on the prize’.

May’s speech referred to eight specific aspects of inequality and injustice, which divided people by income, ethnicity, gender, class, and generation, with impacts on education, employment, income, criminal justice, home ownership and life expectancy (Box).

Box: The burning injustices of the UK according to Theresa May, 2016

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| 1. *“If you’re born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others”* 2. *“If you’re black, you’re treated more harshly by the criminal justice system”* 3. *“If you’re a white, working-class boy, you’re less likely than anybody else in Britain to go to university”* 4. *“If you’re at a state school, you’re less likely to reach the top professions”* 5. *“If you’re a woman, you will earn less”* 6. *“If you suffer from mental health problems, there’s not enough help”* 7. *“If you’re young, you’ll find it harder than ever before to own your own home”* 8. *“You have a job but you don’t always have job security. You have your own home, but you worry about paying a mortgage. You can just about manage but you worry about the cost of living and getting your kids into a good school… The government I lead will be driven not by the interests of the privileged few, but by yours”* |

Source: [Prime Minister's Office](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/prime-ministers-office-10-downing-street) 2016[[1]](#endnote-1)

The speech was eye-catching and ear-catching. Its focus on insecurity and stress was genuinely novel. There was an unusual direct promise to one segment of the electorate, ‘ordinary working class families’ or JAMs. References to race, class and gender were also very direct. It could be argued, however, that May’s concerns were broadly similar to those of the Blair government about ‘social exclusion’ on its arrival in power two decades before[[2]](#endnote-2). What was remarkable was, firstly, that these injustices still existed after all this time; secondly, that it was a Conservative prime minister who chose to draw attention to them; and thirdly, this was despite the fact she had just been in government for six years.

What progress has there been over May’s first year? Some of the measures chosen are such that it is hard to say, and is almost unfair to ask. For example, the quoted evidence on life expectancy relates to 2007-11[[3]](#endnote-3) and the next is unlikely to be available until 2019. Realistically, the results of even the most revolutionary putative May initiatives (had there been any) on life expectancy would not be seen for years in any case.

However, this is all the more reason to make rapid strides on developing policy to address deep-rooted unfairness. What progress has there been on policy? Brexit and party leadership questions may have managed to make public discourse simultaneously more conflictual and more dull. However, another important cost is that they have hogged, and will continue to hog, public, political, civil service and parliamentary time, to the exclusion of other important topics, such as planning, housing and burning social injustice.

The single most comprehensive government policy statement of the last year has been the somewhat ill-fated Conservative manifesto. It repeated concern about ‘burning social injustice’ and ‘enduring social divisions’ - in fact, it was the only manifesto of the three main parties to mention social class[[4]](#endnote-4).However it contained nothing that might reduce health inequalities. It narrowed the focus on ethnic disparities in criminal justice to stop and search and the use of violence. Inequality in education was to be overcome through more free schools, grammar schools, and a review of school admissions. Gender inequality was to be tackled through publishing data and exhortations to good behaviour. On mental health, new legislation was promised but parity of esteem in funding was sidestepped. The Conservative manifesto made bigger promises than Labour’s or the Lib Dems’ on new housing development, but short of a very special, pro-youth type of trickle-down, there was nothing to stop new homes being snapped up by older people, perhaps even adding to generational disparities.

Unfortunately, the burning injustice present in the UK in 2016 remains still in 2017. It has only been added to by the horribly symbolic injustice of the awful fire at Grenfell Tower. A more radical and probably much more expensive effort will be needed to turn May’s promises into discernible change. These promises and May herself are at risk of passing into history. However, just as Barack Obama can be said to have contributed to racial equality in the USA simply by being elected, so these promises have contributed to aspirations for social justice in the UK simply by being stated in Downing Street.

1. [Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/prime-ministers-office-10-downing-street) and [The Rt Hon Theresa May MP](https://www.gov.uk/government/people/theresa-may) (2016) *Statement from the new Prime Minister Theresa May, 13th July* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004) *The Social Exclusion Unit* London: ODPM [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ONS (2015) *Trend in life expectancy at birth and at age 65 by socio-economic position based on the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification, England and Wales: 1982— 1986 to 2007—2011* London: ONS [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Conservative Party (2017) *Forward together: Our plan for a stronger Britain and a prosperous future* The Conservative and Unionist Party manifesto 2017 London: The Conservative and Unionist Party; Labour Party (2017) *For the many, not the few: The Labour Party Manifesto* London: Labour Party; Liberal Democrat Party (2017) *Change Britain’s future: Liberal Democrat manifesto* London: Liberal Democrat Party [↑](#endnote-ref-4)