

Social mobility is on the British government's agenda. It doesn't matter what the government proposes because none of the suggested measures can do more than scratch the surface of the problem, at disproportionate cost. But to be fair to the government, neither the Conservatives nor the LibDems have any better policies.

Britain's great social divide appeared in the second half of the eighteenth century when the peasants were evicted from their land in the enclosures. After that, there were those who owned land and those who did not. The former could live off rent. The latter were obliged to work for wages and pay rent, on whatever terms the landowners deigned to offer. In practice, this meant that the mass of the people became wage slaves. To stave off revolution, governments then became charities to alleviate the resultant intractable poverty. All was paid for by screwing the not-quite-poorest workers.

The significance of land is not always obvious. Few people gain their livelihoods directly off the land. Yet much of the vast profits of the supermarket chains is land rent. Land which can be used for offices and factories is thousands of times more valuable than land for growing food on. The significance of land in the economy is vastly more in this age of technology than it ever was in pre-industrial times.

Most of the value of "assets" such as shares is land value. To sum up: there are those who own land and those who do not. That is the great economic rift. The latter are forced to pay rent and work for wages. The former can live off rental income without doing anything at all as the stream of rental income just drops into their hands. It is very difficult to move from being a wage-slave to living from rental income, and however well they study and do their jobs, they are always at the mercy of the ups-and-downs of the economic cycle.

One of the evil effects of the divide is the low status of those who do menial tasks. There is no shame in doing such work. Here in Brighton, the seafront cleaners seem to be well educated. Who is to say they have wasted their education? It is snobbish attitudes that are the problem, plus the conditions of work in which people doing menial tasks get treated like dirt, which seems to be part of the British way of life, but it starts at the top with our stratified society with blueblooded landowners sitting on top.