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*The
Monday
Essay*

The secret elitists

Being a liberal means sharing – schools, streets and jobs. The uncomfortable truth is that most of us forget our high-minded principles when it gets close to home, says **Bill Tuckey**

Are you furious with Clegg? In sympathy with the rampaging student hordes? Do you believe that tuition fees, housing benefit changes and other ConDem cuts will act as social barbed wire, annexing the poor in a life of inescapable disadvantage?

You may well be one of the many well-meaning, left-leaning citizens out there who believe that this Government is taking a silver-topped cane to smash cherished values of inclusivity and equality. And if so, you are doubtless as mad as hell about it.

But hold on, dear middle-class reader. Forget about all the protest and insurrection for a moment, and let's look closer to home. Here's another question that you might find a little more uncomfortable. Is it possible that, in your own more subtle and perhaps unwitting way, you are collaborating in exactly the kind of social splintering that you find so politically distasteful?

Certainly, that's what I see going on among the liberal-left in the north London village where I live, an area where artists, media types and public sector workers nest alongside some of the most deprived communities in Britain.

Here in Stoke Newington, the poor may always be among us, but you could move for a long time in the best progressive circles, and barely be aware of that fact.

Before I go any further, I should say that this is not some kind of neo-con knee to the groin of "liberal hypocrites", but more a quest for understanding of how and why we all come to fall short of our inclusive ideals – as seen, stones in hand, from the inside of the glass house.

And with that rider in place, follow me, if you will, on a journey through the streets of my neighbourhood. We'll start at the local school. Most of us send our children to state schools round here. But from reception class on, Archie, Alfie and Freya don't play with Jayden, Megan and Mohammed much.

Their parents don't talk to each other much, either – although when the PTA meets in the French pâtisserie down the road, its middle-class stalwarts express puzzlement that parents from different cultural backgrounds have been so reluctant to join them for an almond croissant, a £2 *caffè grande crema* and a discussion about furthering the inclusion agenda.

By the time the children get to secondary, the class gap has become so wide that open hostility sometimes breaks out between the middle-class children, aka the "skaters", and the "just do it crew" – as their less privileged, Nike-loving peers are nicknamed. It's been going on this way for years.

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And it's not peculiar to my area. In a 2008 nationwide study by the British Journal of Sociology of Education, researchers looked at 125 white middle-class households who chose inner-city comprehensive schooling. They found a similar split, with "swotties" and "charvers" sticking to their own social groups. They also found middle-class parents "beset with moral ambiguity" about their choice of schooling, agonising over how to square "wanting to do the egalitarian right thing" with their desire to "maintain and enhance their social position" and avoid their children mixing with the undesirable other.

As it turned out, their children mostly achieved A-stars for social position: "They find they are in the top sets," researchers found. "They dominate the Gifted and Talented scheme and they are treated as somewhat 'special'. Both the children and the parents are highly valued by the schools, which in turn strengthens their privileged positions and agency."

An issue of prime importance for these parents in choosing their child's school was "the need for assurance that there are other children at this school 'like us'". And this brings us on to the subject of housing, an area which provides an equally bright window (sash or uPVC?) on the liberal middle classes' ambiguous embrace of inclusion.

Where you live affects your school choice and so much more. One Stoke Newington mother admitted to me that she doesn't invite her son's friends round for tea because if people knew she lived in a council flat, she feared that would be the end of his play-date circuit.

At election time, you could walk for miles along the rows of Victorian terraces that make up my neighbourhood without seeing a window poster of any shade other than red, green or orange. And yet all those expensively retiled front paths, wooden shutters and tasteful loft extensions speak of a true blue competitiveness, a hunger to display status and *difference* that dominoes down roads near the park and the best schools, but

comes to a halt in the surrounds of the larger housing estates.

Tim Butler, professor of geography at King's College London and co-author of *London Calling: The Middle Classes and the Re-making of Inner London*, has studied such matters closely. "People like the idea and frisson of living in a socially mixed area," he says, "but actually, these groups move past each other in separate worlds which rarely impinge on each other. I refer to this as 'social tectonics'."

"Gentrification," he adds, "is on the one hand about managing social diversity, but on the other hand flocking together – people like us. These are very strong instincts and I guess the question you have to ask is to what extent that diversity becomes more of a social wallpaper."

Butler has a rather sad explanation for why this flocking happens: "Many middle-class people living in the city now were brought up in monocultural suburbs and they would tell you that it was boring, it was death out there: and they don't want it. But because of their own upbringing, they lack skills in dealing with people different from themselves."

The social bonds formed punting on the Cam or drunk-dancing at the Magdalene Ball give rise to the same kind of leftie un-inclusiveness in the political world, where roughly half the Shadow Cabinet and every single Lib-Dem cabinet member are Oxbridge graduates too.

It's not as if anybody sets out deliberately to shut out the less privileged, but, as a report by the Social Market Foundation last week highlighted, to get a foot in the door of many plum middle-class professions – especially in the creative industries – connections are everything.

In August, the think tank Demos published a report, *Access All Areas*, which urged "action to be taken to get disadvantaged young people into internships normally dominated by the middle classes", citing evidence that "work placements can compound the class divide".

Elitism breeds more elitism, then. I meet up with an award-winning television producer friend, who ex-

plains what this means in his particular world: "TV executives are obsessed by representing everyone," he says. "All the channels do a lot of tub-thumping about it, but it's pretty meaningless. My family and friends are from a fairly mixed bag class-wise and race-wise, and so I hear lots of interesting stories and have lots of references that most of the people who control the TV agenda don't have. But when I pitch programmes that could appeal to viewers who they are not already appealing to, they won't commission them, because they don't understand them: the terms of reference simply aren't there. They want people to pitch to them things that they're going to get, so it's a vicious circle."

Later, the author and journalist Richard Benson tells me a similar tale of unintended marginalisation far from the iPhone-waving media world. For his forthcoming book, he has been interviewing former miners in Yorkshire, some of whom have gone into

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social work. "I hear a lot from them about a very subtle imposition of middle-class values," Benson says. "There was one who'd been studying why young men didn't use Sure Start centres. One of the reasons that he found was that the interiors were too posh: 'Going in there makes me feel like a rubbing rag,' was one quote. They'd spent a lot of money making these centres all wood, glass and leather sofas – a socially specific idea of what something nice was – and it intimidated people. It's only a small thing, but that's life – the big things play out in these small points..."

Benson recently edited *The Middle Class Handbook*, a study of "the behaviour and tastes of Britain's new middle-class tribes". During his research, he found: "If you do anything about politics, no one is interested; if you do anything about food or language,



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people really like to talk about that. The conceit of the book, in fact, was that in classifying the middle classes, the cultural differences now are more relevant than the financial ones."

It's all in the details, to which our antennae are so finely tuned. On the pavements, it might be a pair of Carhartt jeans, or an Orla Kiely handbag, that sets us apart. Or just an attitude. You could shop at Aldi because it's cheap, or because you've discovered they sell marinated wild mushrooms. You could watch *The X Factor* because you like a good tune, or because it's a fascinating exercise in audience manipulation.

"Class differences in everyday tastes – in things ranging from the types of food and clothing we like, to our preferences in music, art, gardening, or sports – serve as resources in the competition between classes," according to the sociologist Wendy Bottero. "High social position still helps to 'insure' against weaker educational performance, and numerous studies show that if we compare lower-achievers, those from more privileged backgrounds have much better careers than their less advantaged peers."

Think about *that* next time you settle down on your Habitat sofa with a glass of Malbec to watch *The Culture Show*. You really should: because while there are a thousand and one ways in which we use these social markers – both overtly and unconsciously – to stake out our position in the world, there's been very little academic study of the subject.

"I think everybody's uncomfortable looking at the subject, to be honest," says Diane Reay, professor of education at Cambridge University, and a pioneer in such "psychosocial" research. "There's been much more academic work done on race and gender than the painful differences around social class. Society's saturated by it, and so is our media, so it's an amazing contradiction. Once it's about ourselves, then all these difficult emotions come up and people dis-identify – nobody wants to own up to the class they belong to."

Professor Reay also thinks that for well-meaning liberals, it's harder than ever not to fall prey to "sublimated elitism" because "we're living in a world where there's less and less certainty, and that causes a whole lot of anxieties

which make you less receptive to difference and otherness".

This is echoed by the handful of other academics who are dipping their toes into the murky psychological depths where liberal values and baser instincts collide. The economist Professor Guy Standing, for example, who has charted the slide away from altruism and tolerance among that large group of stressed, job-insecure Britons he dubs the "precariat". And the social epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, whose 2009 surprise best-seller *The Spirit Level* examined how status anxiety in unequal countries such as Britain and the US adversely affects our health, as well as our ability to trust others and engage in community life.

The subject is obviously a huge one and this essay barely lifts a semi-submerged corner for inspection, let alone offer solutions. Set against the crunching shake-ups now taking place at government level, it could, in any case, seem irrelevant – or even wrong – to worry about the minor lapses of the residents of Stoke Newington and other liberal enclaves.

After all, you can't have good intentions without a little hypocrisy – we strive, we fall short, everyone knows that, so why sweat it? What's the alternative? It was the collapse of a bewhiskered and slightly patronising liberal self-confidence at the end of the Victorian age that paved the way for a lethal right-wing ascendancy.

But while we progressives mustn't throw the baby out with the bath water, that doesn't mean we should ignore those murky areas of our psyche where the urges to belong, to display status – and, yes, exclude too – rattle about. The more we understand them, the more secure our true values become. Besides, new research suggests self-doubt is in liberals' *genes*. You can't be a good one without beating yourself up every now and again.



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Social split: (clockwise from main) private and council housing in north London; where you live affects schooling; twee and cakes; a market for the middle class? ALAMY

