



A Bronze Bullet: The Spirit Level—Why Equality is Better for Everyone

by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

Summary by Philip Symons

Note: The danger in summarizing a groundbreaking work is that people will read the summary and feel no need to read the entire opus. At the same time, the danger in not providing a summary is that those who could use the wisdom will not read the book and remain uninformed. But a summary cannot do justice to the breadth of wisdom in some 300 pages of exhaustive but nevertheless easy-to-read research. With some trepidation, therefore, I present this summary, a trepidation that is eased only slightly by simultaneously urging you to read the book¹. It's well worth it. P.S.

A bronze bullet

I am not one to believe in panaceas or silver bullets, but if ever there was a single policy that would cure just about all society's ills, increasing equality in wealth must be it, and "The Spirit Level," normally a carpenter's tool for ensuring constructions are aligned with gravity, but here a book, has become my second bible. Perhaps, rather, it's my new testament, my old one, which indicated that to avoid global catastrophe we must tackle many problems at once, being "Beyond the Limits" (Meadows, Meadows and Rand, 1992, the sequel to the controversial "Limits to Growth").

Here is a partial list of social attributes that improve with increasing equality in income (for a more complete list see box): health, mental illness, substance abuse, trust in one another, child well-being, homicide and imprisonment rates, innovation, economic stability...baseball team success! One almost wonders whether "better bran muffins" might be on the list.

You may think this sounds too good to be true. Other factors must be important, too, and surely there must be something that greater equality in incomes does not improve. There are some

exceptions, as we shall see, which is why this is a bronze bullet rather than a silver one.

Household income a factor only in developing nations

Wilkinson and Pickett in "The Spirit Level" show that average life expectancy in different countries increases with national income per person up to about \$15,000 per year, but from about \$22,000 to \$42,000 per year (the top rate) there is no further improve-

Social attributes that improve with increasing equality in income. Page numbers are to data in "The Spirit Level—Why Equality is Better for Everyone," 2010 edition.	
Social attributes that improve with income equality	page
Index of health and social problems	20
Index of child well-being	23
Degree of trust	52-53
Women's status	59
Per cent spent on foreign aid	61
Mental illness	67
Drug abuse	72
Life expectancy	82
Infant deaths	82
Obesity	92-94
Mathematical ability and literacy	106
High school dropout rate	107
Work level aspirations	116
Teenage birth rates	122
Homicide rate	135
Children's experience of conflict	139
Imprisonment rates	148
Social mobility	160
Innovation—patent application rate	225
Annual work hours (fewer is better)	229
Recycling rate (rank)	232
National score on Global Peace Index	235
Economic stability	237, 239, 241, 296
Baseball team success (with greater equality among players)	257
Freedom and democracy	263-264
Sustainability	217-233

¹The Spirit Level—Why Equality is Better for Everyone, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, Penguin Books, London, England, 2009, published with a new postscript in 2010. All page numbers cited in this summary refer to the 2010 edition. An interview with Wilkinson by Brooke Jarvis was reprinted in JUSTnews Spring 2010, Vol. 14, No. 1.

ment. Similarly, the percent of people feeling “very happy” or “quite happy” in various countries improves with increasing national income per person up to about \$18,000 per year, but between \$30,000 and \$42,000 there is no further improvement in happiness. Canada’s median income per person in 2009 was \$48,300 (Conference Board of Canada); clearly, further increases in wealth of Canadians will not increase either our life expectancy or our happiness (see also JUSTnews Winter 2006, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 10).

Yet, over and over again we hear in the news that we must maintain our national or provincial economic growth if we’re to remain happy, healthy people. This simply isn’t true; Canada is already rich enough to meet all our needs.

Developing countries do need to increase personal income to achieve the levels of life expectancy and happiness seen in developed nations. Social health in developing countries might be improved even further if incomes were more equal than they are now, especially since much of that inequality arises from corruption.

The data

Wilkinson and Pickett restricted their analyses to OECD countries in part because these are the countries for which reasonably reliable and complete data are available, but also to avoid possible confounding effects of extreme variation in national personal income on effects of inequality in income on the social attributes they wished to examine.

Wilkinson and Pickett took another precautionary step. In addition to using average U.N. Developmental Programme Human Development Indicators over years 2003-2006 for income inequality, they compared the results from those data with results from an independent data set: data from the U.S. Census Bureau for the fifty U.S. States. The correlations between income inequality and various social attributes for the U.S. states show a greater scatter than the data for the 23 OECD countries, but in every case the trend is the same. The conclusions apply not only across countries, but within the U.S., and we can safely assume within Canada as well.

What greater income equality could mean for Canada

Canada happens to be bung in the middle of the list of countries with increasing income disparity, with Spain and France bordering Canada with slightly smaller but increasing income gaps, and Switzerland with slightly larger income inequality (Fig. 1).

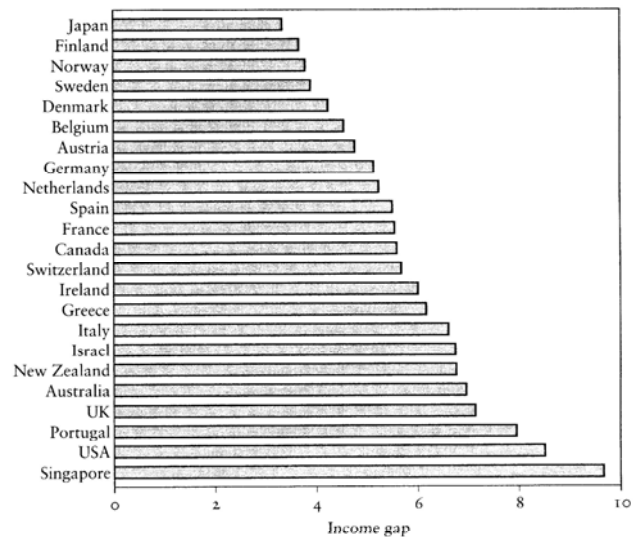


Fig. 1. Income disparity rank among OECD countries

Japan has the smallest inequality in income, closely followed by the Scandinavian countries in the order Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The Netherlands is closer to Canada (less income disparity than Spain) than it is to its Scandinavian neighbours.

Countries with the greatest inequalities in income are Singapore, the U.S. (not surprisingly), Portugal, the U.K., Australia and New Zealand.

On all the social attributes mentioned so far, Japan and the Scandinavian countries do best, the U.S. and Singapore worst, and Canada and its neighbours somewhere in between.

As an example, consider levels of trust. Michael Moore in his film “Fahrenheit 911” made a point of how Americans were more fearful (mistrustful) of one another than Canadians, who, he suggested, don’t bother to lock their front doors. As Canadians know, Moore exaggerates, but his thesis is supported by Wilkinson’s and Pickett’s data, although the level of trust in the U.S. is not as different from Canada’s as the line of best fit suggests it should be (Fig. 2).

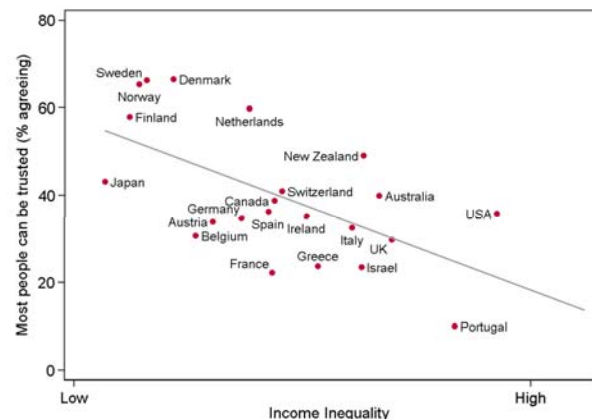


Fig. 2. The percentage of people agreeing that ‘most people can be trusted’ is higher in more equal countries.

A message for politicians

What the relationship between trust and income equality should suggest to Canadian politicians is that if they wish to improve respect and trust in themselves and their work, one of the most effective steps they could take would be to reduce the level of income inequality in Canada. It would also do a lot of good for our country.

“Trust,” a somewhat abstract concept, is fundamental to societal health. As Wilkinson and Pickett say (p. 54), “Imagine living somewhere where 90 per cent of the population mistrusts one another and what that must mean for the quality of everyday life—the interactions between people at work, on the street, in shops, in schools. In Norway it is not unusual to see cafés with tables and chairs on the pavement and blankets left out for people to use if they feel chilly while having a coffee. Nobody worries about customers or passers-by stealing the blankets.”

Income equality a road to smaller government and lower costs through societal health

Because reducing inequality in incomes reduces a whole host of societal problems, the infrastructure we currently have in place to ameliorate these problems, such as welfare systems, health-care systems, police forces, etc. can also be reduced, decreasing governmental bureaucracy and the costs and need for taxes to support them.

Decreasing income inequality reduces national obesity rates overall, but particularly among youth 13 and 15 years old (Fig. 3).

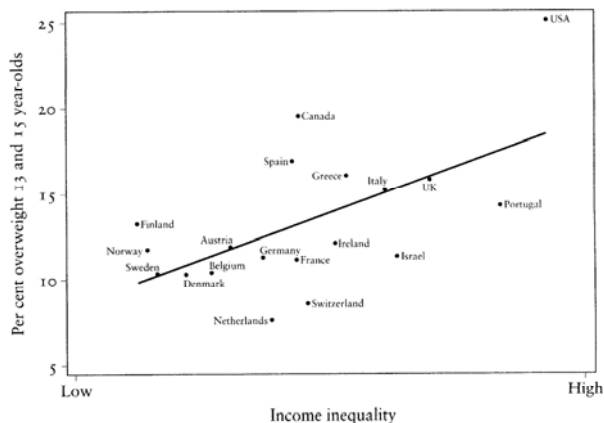


Fig. 3 More children are overweight in more unequal countries

It reduces teenage pregnancy rates (Fig. 4), violence as expressed by homicide rates (Fig. 5), but other forms of violence, too (childhood experiences of conflict, bullying...), including imprisonment rates (Fig. 6).

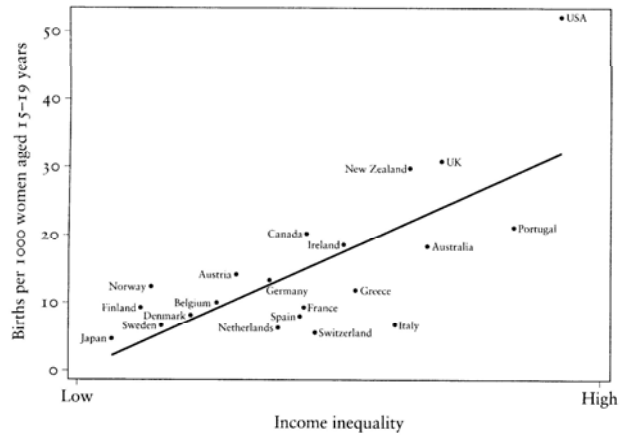


Fig. 4. Teenage birth rates are higher in more unequal countries

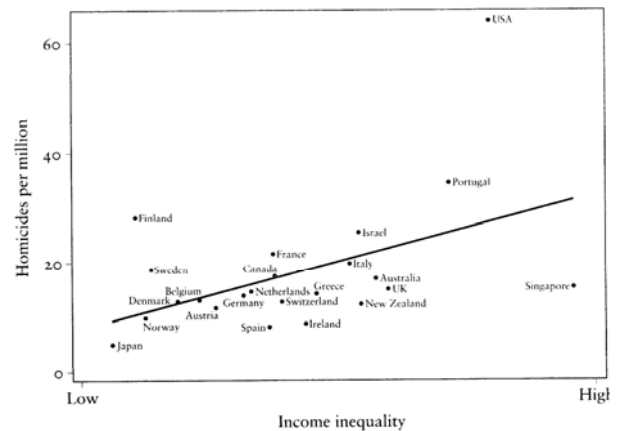


Fig. 5. Homicides are more common in more unequal countries.

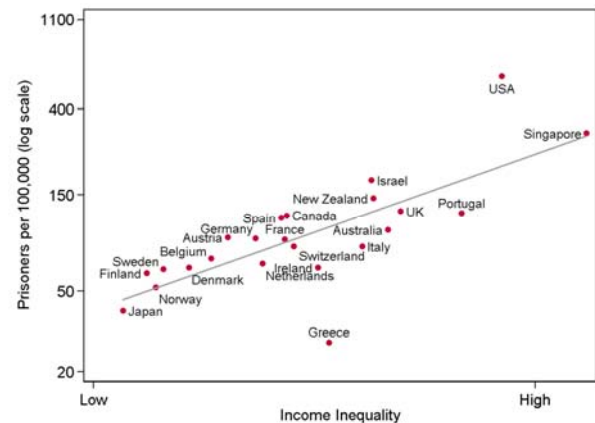


Fig. 6. More people are imprisoned in more unequal countries.

Greater income inequality increases health and social problems (Fig. 7). This index includes drug use, and mental health. Income inequality lowers the UNICEF index of child well-being (Fig. 8).

Surprisingly, national income per person (a measure of a country’s wealth) is not related to health and social problems (Fig. 9), and is unrelated to child well-being (Fig. 10).

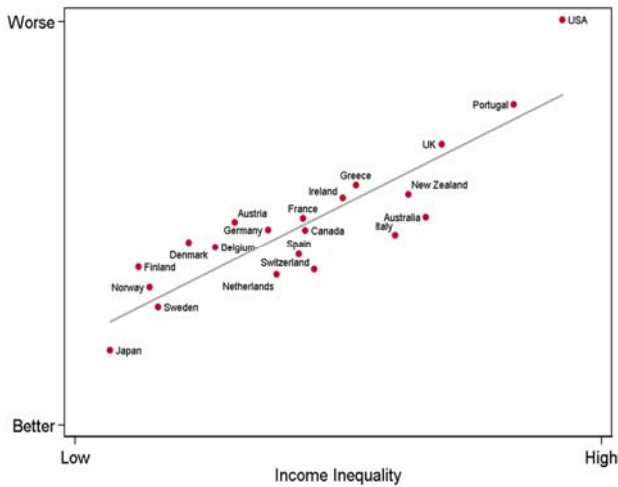


Fig. 7. Index of health and social problems is worse in countries with higher income inequality.

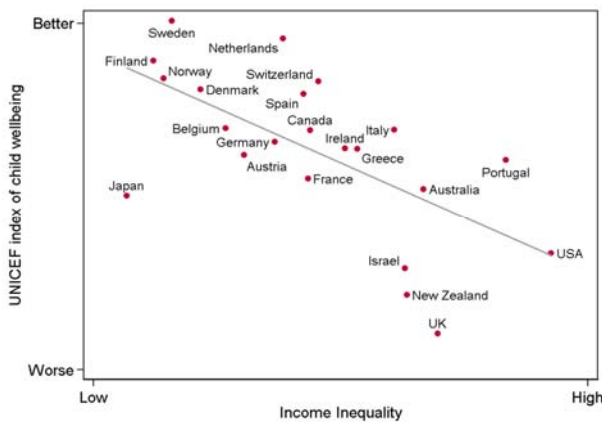


Fig. 8. The UNICEF index of child well-being is better in countries with low inequality.

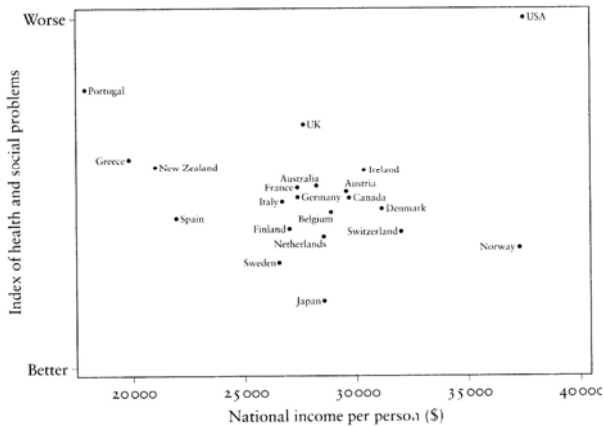


Fig. 9. Index of health and social problems is unrelated to national wealth.

Nor does health expenditure per person increase life expectancy in OECD countries (Fig. 11). The U.S. Spends far more on health than any other country, and has one of the lowest life-expectancies of all OECD countries (Ireland, Denmark and Portugal are slightly worse).

“This study confirmed what we suggested in chapter 6:” say Wilkinson and Pickett (p. 291-

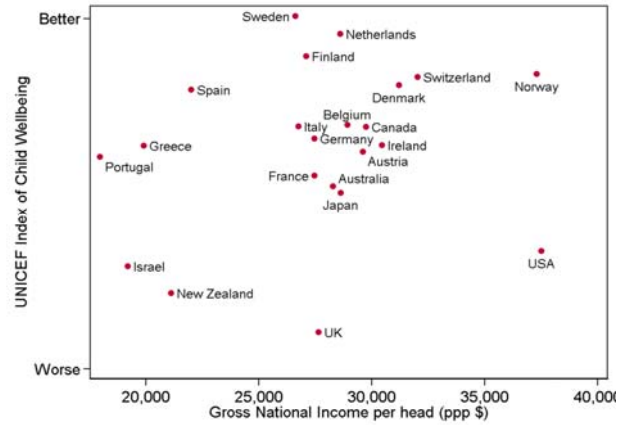


Fig. 10. The UNICEF index of child well-being is not related to Gross National income in OECD countries.

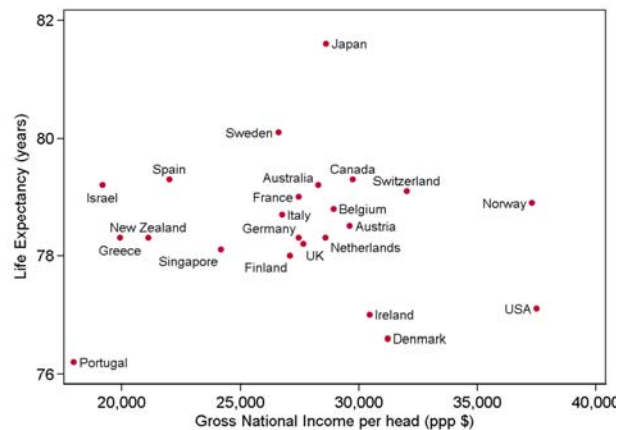


Fig. 11. Life expectancy is not related to Gross National Income in OECD countries.

292) “that levels of trust are indeed part of the explanation, whereas spending on health care is not.”

Other factors affecting societal problems

Decreasing income inequality is one of the most effective—and cheapest—means of reducing societal problems, and should probably therefore be one of the first things any country does to improve conditions for its citizens. However, reducing income inequality is not quite a panacea.

Take obesity among 13 and 15 year olds, for example (Fig. 3, p. 3). While there is some scatter around the line of best fit in this figure, some of which is due to measurement error, of little interest to anyone but social scientists and their statisticians, a few countries were far above the line (more obesity than expected, Canada the U.S.), or well below it (The Netherlands, Switzerland). These extreme exceptions, “outliers,” most likely indicate that something in addition to income inequality is associated with obesity in these countries. While reducing income inequality in Canada may go some way towards decreasing obesity among Canadian youth,

additional actions will be needed to bring Canada's obesity rate down to the level of that found in countries with similar income inequality rates.

The graphs found in the book "The Spirit Level" (and elsewhere) can therefore be used as a tool to suggest where actions in addition to reducing income inequality would be most effective, and also where spending more on a particular problem (obesity in the Netherlands and Switzerland, for example) would likely be a waste of money.

A strange anomaly

There is one other example where reducing income inequality is a bronze rather than silver bullet. Recently I was telling a friend, whose father was Norwegian, how much better Scandinavian countries did on almost all measures of societal health because of their relative income equality, thinking this would heighten my friend's pride in her heritage. But she set me back on my heels by replying, "But Norway has the highest suicide rate of all countries."

Wilkinson and Pickett do address this anomaly without specifically mentioning Norway. Here is what they have to say about it (p. 175).

The only social problem we have encountered which tends to be more common in more equal countries (but not significantly among more equal states in the USA) is, perhaps surprisingly, suicide. The reasons for this are twofold. First, in some countries suicide is not more common lower down the social scale. In Britain a well-defined social gradient has only emerged in recent decades. Second, suicide is often inversely related to homicide. There seems to be something in the psychological cliché that anger sometimes goes in and sometimes goes out: do you blame yourself or others for things that go wrong?

In other words, in countries with more equal wealth, it is more difficult to blame something or someone else for one's failures, so the anger turns inward and may result in suicide. This is a problem that requires its own investigation and solutions.

Greater equality in incomes benefits everyone

Lower income inequality is associated with greater improvement in societal problems for the poor than for the wealthy, but Wilkinson and Pickett present data showing that in more equal U.S. states death rates of both the wealthy and the

poor were reduced. Improvement was greater among the poor, but both benefited (Fig. 12).

But one scarcely needs Wilkinson's and

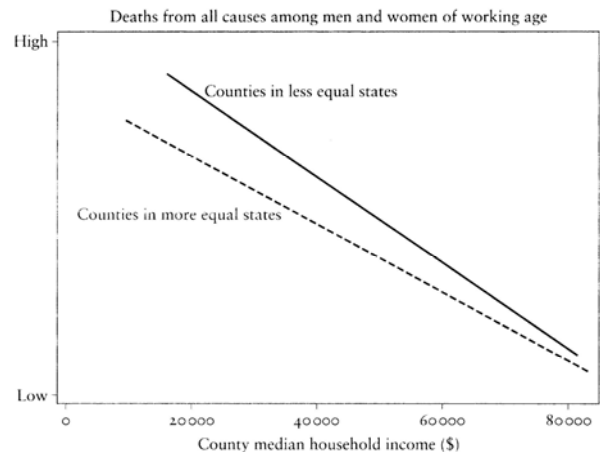


Fig. 12. Mortality rates in U.S. counties are lower in states where median incomes are more equal than in states where they are less equal, regardless of wealth.

Pickett's data to realize that the wealthy will also benefit from a healthier society where one does not have to worry about one's car being stolen, or whether one should live in a gated community to feel safe. The wealthy also benefit from being able to walk the streets without fear of being mugged, and from being able to go to hospital with a broken arm and not have to wait for hours because Emergency Services are plugged with the mentally ill and homeless, whose health is a constant emergency and cost.

There is no question that greater equality in wealth benefits the already fortunate among us as well as the poor. The question is, how do we get equality? How do we create a society without extremes in income?

Are humans innately greedy?

Some people feel that humans are innately greedy and are not interested in equality. While this has yet to be disproved, Wilkinson and Pickett cite some interesting evidence that humans have evolved from a cooperative branch of pre-humans (pp. 203-205).

Closely related chimpanzees and bonobos have distinctly different hierarchical societies. Chimpanzees have strong male-dominated social hierarchies, based on superior size and strength, and an ability to form alliances, whereas bonobos show much less conflict between groups than do chimps.

"So what makes the difference?" ask Wilkinson and Pickett. Their answer: "Interestingly, a section of DNA, known to be important in

the regulation of social, sexual and parenting behaviour, has been found to differ between chimps and bonobos. It is perhaps comforting to know that, at least in this section of DNA, humans have the bonobo rather than the chimp pattern, suggesting that our common ancestor may have had a preference for making love rather than war.”

“Perhaps it is time we moved away from a world in which people regard maximizing personal gains as a laudable aim in life,” say Wilkinson and Pickett (p. 260).

Equality and sustainability

“Economic Growth: Our Common Foe” proclaims the headline above an article by Neil K. Dawe in the Spring 2008 issue of JUSTnews (Vol. 12, No. 1). Somehow, if we are to live peacefully and happily on this earth, we have to reduce carbon emissions in order to slow global climate change, and to reduce carbon emissions we need to reduce consumption, and to reduce consumption we have to start thinking about a no-growth economy, unthinkable though that may be to most modern-day economists.

“How might greater equality and policies to reduce carbon emissions go together?” ask Wilkinson and Pickett (p. 217). “Given what inequality does to a society, and particularly how it heightens competitive consumption, it looks not only as if the two are complimentary, but also that governments may be unable to make big enough cuts in carbon emissions *without also reducing inequality*” (emphasis added).

Monbiot, in his book “Heat,” recommends carbon rationing rather than a carbon tax because it is fairer; rich and poor receive the same ration regardless of wealth. In addition, rationing directly impinges on carbon emissions in the way a carbon tax does not, and emission targets are therefore easier to set and achieve. At the start of such a scheme, when the poor might not use their whole ration, they could sell a part of it to the wealthy, but as rationing tightens, equality increases, and the wealthy, too, must decrease consumption.

Creating a more equal society

Wilkinson and Pickett are at pains to point out that the means of achieving greater income equality is unimportant; the level of equality is what counts, no matter how it is achieved.

There are two major methods of reducing inequality: by taxing it away from the very wealthy (the Scandinavian countries) or by restricting maximum income before taxes (Japan).

There may be a third method, but its practicality and efficacy are unknown as it has never been tried: instead of restricting income, let people earn what they will, but restrict the amount anyone can *spend* in one year, say to \$200,000 (including investments—for further details see JUSTnews, Spring 2008, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp 8-9).

We tend to think that increasing taxes or restricting income would be unpopular in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. (and perhaps elsewhere). But this belief is false. Here are Wilkinson and Pickett on what the public think about inequality in income (p. 249).

Public opinion polls suggest that there is a substantial desire for narrower income differences. In Britain over the last twenty years polls have shown that the proportion of the population who think that income differences are too big has averaged around 80 per cent and has rarely dipped below 75%—even though most people underestimate how big income differences actually are. In the USA, the 2005 Maxwell Poll on Civic Engagement reported that over 80 per cent of the population thought the extent of inequality was a problem, and almost 60 per cent thought the government should try to reduce it. Gallup polls between 1984 and 2003, which asked Americans whether income and wealth were fairly distributed or should be more evenly distributed, found that over 60 per cent of the population thought they should be more evenly distributed.

Equality and productivity

And lest anyone think that high taxes and more equal income make a country uncompetitive, the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitive Index ranked Finland fourth in productivity behind Switzerland, Singapore and Sweden, and immediately ahead of the U.S. Finland is the country with the greatest equality of income except Japan. Competitiveness, however, probably has little relation to income equality one way or the other.

Finland does have the most innovative population as measured by number of patents per million people (Fig. 13). Note also that Singapore, the U.S., Portugal, the U.K., Italy, Canada and Spain are the least innovative of all countries.

The role of government

The problem with government intervention to increase equality in income is that succeeding governments can undo the good. Wilkinson and Pickett note that “[Paul] Krugman argues that,

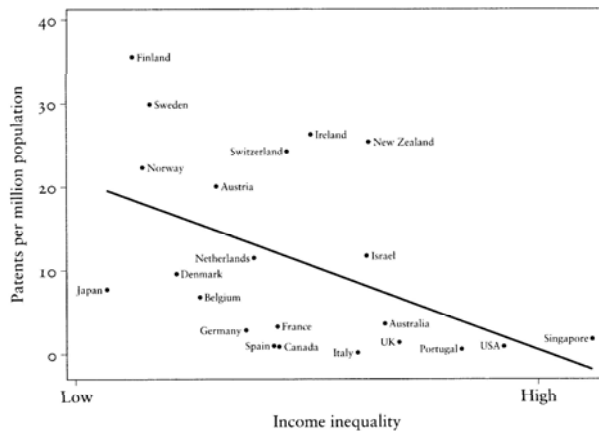


Fig. 13. More equal societies are more innovative.

rather than market forces, rising inequality was driven by ‘changes in institutions, norms and political power’. He emphasizes the weakening of trade unions, the abandonment of productivity sharing agreements, the influence of the political right, and government changes in taxes and benefits. He could also have added the failure to maintain adequate minimum wage legislation” (p. 243). Because of current political anathema to raising taxes or setting income limits (or perhaps spending limits), more subtle and indirect methods of working towards income equality may be needed.

For instance, Wilkinson and Pickett suggest increasing democratic employee ownership of businesses. This would remove power from the hands of a few to the hands of many. Share-ownership plans are another possibility, but they must be combined with participant management methods if they are to be successful. Cooperatives and employee ownership extend employee responsibility further. “Employee-ownership has the advantage of increasing equality specifically by extending liberty and democracy. It is bottom-up rather than top-down” (Wilkinson and Pickett p. 259). Governments can encourage employee ownership with legal support and tax incentives.

“The truth is,” conclude Wilkinson and Pickett, “that modern inequality exists because democracy is excluded from the economic sphere. It needs therefore to be dealt with by an extension of democracy into the workplace. We need to experiment with every form of economic democracy—employee ownership, producer and consumer cooperatives, employee representatives on company boards and so on” (p. 264).

What we can do

Wilkinson and Pickett conclude their tour de force with these words in their final chapter (p. 269).

What is essential if we are to bring a better society into being is to develop a sustained movement committed to doing that. Policy changes will need to be consistently devoted to this end over several decades and that requires a society that knows where it wants to go. To help with this we provide—and will continue to provide—our research findings, graphs and other information on the Equality Trust’s website (www.equalitytrust.org.uk).

The initial task is to gain a widespread understanding of what is at stake. But rather than allowing this to be just one more idea that briefly gains attention before fashionable opinion moves on, we need to build a social movement committed to its realization. It must be taken up and pursued by a network of equality groups meeting to share ideas and action everywhere, in homes and offices, in trade unions and political parties, in churches and schools. It needs to be pursued by the pressure groups, charities and services concerned with the various issues which are related to equality, whether health or teenage births, prison populations or mental health, drugs or educational standards. And they need to be coupled with the urgent task of dealing with global warming. In all these settings we must speak out and explain the advantages of a more equal society.



Richard Wilkinson has played a formative role in international re-search on the social determinants of health. He studied economic history at the London School of Economics before training in epidemiology and is Professor Emeritus at the Univer-sity of Nottingham

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