

# Welsh Local Government Association and NHS Centre for Equality and Human Rights Joint Annual Conference Equality in 2014: Luxury or Necessity?

## Equality and austerity: Challenges and solutions

First, I would like to thank the organisers of the conference, most notably Catryn Holzinger, for inviting me here today, and allowing me to participate in us *all* addressing what is an extremely important set of issues concerning the affects of inequality in 2014 for our towns, villages, and cities, up-and-down the country. Second, I would also like to thank the Minister, Jeff Cuthbert, for raising some very pertinent and relevant issues concerning the main theme of the conference, as to whether we should see equality as a *luxury* or a *necessity*, clearly this is a crucial question for Local Governments and Health Authorities to address, and most notably perhaps, in times of economic austerity – although even in more prosperous periods, as I will expand on shortly, I will argue that the question about the *value* of equality *should* not go away.

More specifically, regarding my role and background very briefly – although I did train as a social worker in the 1980s and worked outside of academia for the first ten years or so of my career, I am first and foremost an academic. My main research and teaching interests focus on issues of social justice, fairness, and equality, and as these values relate to political philosophy, and, in turn, how these values are then *understood and applied* to public policy and professional practices. Part of my role as an academic, having taught in Higher Education in South Wales now for the past 15 or 16 years, has

been in the education and training of social workers, youth workers, and probation officers. And this role has included setting-up and participating in workshops between academics, social workers and other professionals working for Newport City Council, which, then led to me being invited to be chair of Newport City Council's *Fairness Commission*. With a certain degree of trepidation, I have to say, I took on this role in September 2012. Therefore, my comments today reflect *both* my views as an academic of political philosophy and social policy, but also my experience of chairing what is the first, and at present, *only* Fairness Commission in Wales.

Firstly then, how and, most importantly, *why* was Newport's Fairness Commission set-up? Well, on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 2012 Newport City Council voted for establishing an independent *Fairness Commission* to monitor key Council decisions, according to the criterion of fairness. Consistent with its manifesto pledge, the Commission was set-up by the Labour leadership as part of a "New Charter for Newport", and following similar Commissions which were already established in England at the time, and are still proliferating. The Commission's central remit is broadly two-fold; to address specific concerns about how to assess the impact of extensive cuts in public expenditure and the monitoring of budget spending and trends; PLUS to raise wider political debates about the *meaning* of fairness and how local government policies and practices are able to promote this as a coherent social value.

Now, as we have clearly stated in our reports to council, it's no accident, of course, that in times of severe economic austerity, politicians and policy-makers are keen to

demonstrate that their policies, despite reductions in public expenditure, are still adhering to the principle of fairness. “We can’t do anything about the cuts, but at least we can still use our limited resources fairly”, is the plea, no doubt, that politicians of all persuasions, will make to electorates at impending elections. Fairness Commissions, therefore, have to address the potential criticism that they are mere covers for these austerity measures, with difficult and problematic policy outcomes being ‘sold’ to the electorate as fair, having received the so-called ‘fairness’ rubber-stamp from the local Commission.

Consequently, if Fairness Commissions are to be effective, and, moreover, if they are *seen* to be effective, it is imperative that they act independently from local government – that they are bold enough to constructively but critically engage with Council policies, *and* that this critical engagement is visible to the public, as pertinent policy issues, are raised and discussed in public debate.

However, as a necessary starting point for debate, and as we have also openly acknowledged in our reports and in other forums, it is important to recognise that the *very notion* of fairness is a ‘hurrah’ word which everyone, from whatever political quarter, cheers about and champions. Nobody after all argues for an *unfair* society, as no-one claims they are *against* fairness. Therefore, it is important to state from the outset that the notion of fairness, *by itself*, doesn’t tell us that much about what it means for people as it carries with it different and even competing interpretations. In addition, the Commission has also highlighted that in relation to public agenda-raising, if this is to

be done effectively, it will inevitably bring to the surface the wider and deeper problems of promoting fairness in *any* political, social, and economic context, but most especially in times when resources are being very severely restricted. Plus, we are all also very aware that other pressures on Local Government budgets have led, and *will* lead, to increases in demand on the 'public purse' (relating, for example, to changes in demography across Newport and elsewhere). Consequently, it seems depressingly inevitable that increasing demands, *as well as* restrictions in budget allocations, will result in large shortfalls in Council spending, which, in turn, complicates further how any notion of 'fairness' is both understood and implemented in policy and practice.

So, given all these pressures, the central job of any Fairness Commission, we believe is to move *beyond* political platitudes and start raising in public debate the more difficult questions and issues concerning fairness – so openly exploring the difficulties of implementing policies and budgets while living in a period of economic austerity, but also acknowledging the conflicting 'parameters' of debate *about* fairness, and *whatever* resources are made available to local communities.

What then of the value of equality when considering these issues and pressures? And, how does this value, in turn, relate to the value of fairness? In answer to the first question, and putting on my academic hat for a moment; as I always say to students, when considering issues of equality, it is never enough to ask are you for or against equality, the real question is, 'equality of *what?*' It is this *specific* question which is more helpful in any analysis of policy, as it will determine more broadly what *type* of society

we are after, and, moreover, will expose well the challenges and issues we must face as a result. For example, if we believe that we should be giving people equal educational opportunities at the *start* of their lives, whatever social or economic group they belong (which I guess most of us will be committed to in *some* form), then we need to *also* recognise that this is almost bound to lead to *unequal* outcomes, as certain individuals and groups will use these opportunities more effectively than others. So, sociological studies have repeatedly and consistently shown over the years, (and I am sure this is no news to you as this is so widely reported), how middle-class children tend to use the *state* education system much more effectively than working-class children. This means, in this respect at least, that the middle-classes will disproportionately benefit from state-funded services, *even if* the opportunities available at the start are the same for all. Of course, there is also a long history of local and central government providing *extra*-resources to those from disadvantaged backgrounds concerning their education, but this fact of *unequal* treatment (for justifiable reasons) should not detract from the way those with more privileged backgrounds are able to gain further advantage *overall* from publically available educational provision.

More specifically, then, in matters relating to equality we might ask not only *why* the middle-classes are able to take advantage this way (and certainly there are many, many, competing answers to this question); but also, whether in times of economic austerity, we can justify maintaining educational budgets in line with inflation given these unequal outcomes. Just to make myself clear, I am not saying we *can't* justify this commitment, but if we *do* go down this route, we need to take account of the way equal

opportunities in relation to education at least can often *entrench* unequal outcomes, rather than diminish them, given how the class system works presently in Wales and elsewhere.

So, where else does the equality of what question take us in respect to the value of *fairness*, and as we have had to address this question in Newport's Fairness *Commission*? Well, when focussing on issues concerning when it is fair to treat people the same and when it is fair to treat people differently, we have also tried to explore and expose a number of debates about the *meaning* of fairness as this relates to particular groups and interests. For example, and exploring further the implications of the maintenance of educational budgets, policies dilemmas and conflicts are increasingly emerging which, we believe, need to be made more explicit in public debate – so leading to questions concerning, for example, what groups have priority in Newport, and why? And, if trade-offs and compromises are to be made between different group interests', how should these trade-offs be balanced exactly?

Given these questions, and others beside, it is also important to highlight how, *aside* from the Welsh Government's commitment to maintaining educational budgets in line with inflation, *demographic trends* in Newport at least, mean that education budgets are likely to increase considerably in the medium to long-term, while at the *same time* demographic pressures on social services for older provision will also likely increase during the same period. Therefore, the *trade-off*, as we have called it, between younger and older groups in Newport will become more acute as these conflicting interests

increasingly play-out in policy and practice. In addition, other potential trade-offs are also of particular concern for the Commission and are in danger of being disguised in these debates – most notably perhaps, the trade-off between the differing needs of young people, so where educational budgets increase, for example, but at the expense of other non-statutory services for young people, such as various forms of Youth Provision. This last issue too exposes a further concern, given Newport City Council has to manage large cuts in the social services budget, while also maintaining certain statutory *obligations and duties* to particular groups, such as to children and old people. Inevitably, in times of economic austerity, in policy areas where there are *no* obligations or duties, *or* where the obligations and duties are vaguely articulated in legislation, then these areas will likely suffer considerable reductions in funding to the profound detriment of service-users.

Of course, none of these issues in Newport will be a surprise to you, as many of you here will be dealing with similar dilemmas and conflicts up and down the country, but the point here is that if we are to understand properly the relationship between equality and fairness, and how these values are applied to policy and practice, we must recognise where *precisely* these tensions and conflicts arise. This, though, also gets us to the next question arising from both the challenges *and* solutions to equality and austerity – namely, how we might envisage a more equal society which is seen as benefitting all, *rather than* just a few?

Now, I will sketch out broadly two ways of addressing this question, and which relate to a number of *other* issues Newport's *Fairness Commission* has raised with Council. First, the assertion we have made is that we need to conceptualise our communities *not* as being made-up of isolated self-interested individuals, but rather, more accurately, that we are engaged in interdependent and reciprocal social relations, whether these relations are found in the free-market or the public sector, or other places beside, such as the family and the voluntary sector. Whatever which way, the basic starting point of all social endeavours, as stated by the commission, is that, at a very fundamental and structural level, we should recognise that we depend on *each other* for the flourishing of our communities, and, moreover, that this premise should be the hallmark of Council policies and practices. In the process, we also need to ask some very basic questions concerning the values of fairness and equality. First, how are citizens enabled to positively *participate* in the life of the community over periods of time, for their own and others' benefit? And, second, how and when are equal 'life chances' facilitated, so *enabling* citizens to participate in their communities effectively? These questions, though, gets us to the *second* way of addressing how we might envisage a more equal society which benefits all, rather than just a few – namely, to tackle and address head-on what we *mean* by effective participation.

So, often In Government policies and practices, forms of participation are defined in terms of paid work and the corresponding development of job opportunities and economic regeneration via, say, education and training policies. And, clearly, these kinds of activity are particularly important when understanding how the interdependent

and reciprocal character of community relations are facilitated and enhanced. For example, contributing to the local and national economy via paid work (through the payment of taxes and increased economic productivity) is one of the main-planks of any vibrant and healthy community, and, uncontroversially I guess, should be encouraged by local government through, for example, its education and training programmes. However, it is also important to highlight that many *other* forms of participation and contribution occur outside of paid work, most notably, concerning the unpaid labour that often women do in the home caring for children and other family members, plus voluntary work and wider forms of community participation, and other unpaid cultural and social activities. Given these distinctions between paid and unpaid activities, then, the Newport *Fairness Commission* has been anxious to warn Council against the latter forms of participation being marginalised from mainstream debate, and being thought of as 'less important' than paid work activities. Developing this theme of reciprocity and interdependency further, the Commission has also argued that the Council has a responsibility to encourage public deliberation about the *reciprocal* relationships existing between citizens, tax-regimes, and service provision. So, for example, it is important to see the value of Council Tax not merely in terms of *costs* to council-tax payers but also in terms of the *benefits* received by *all* citizens of Newport when Council Tax is collected and spent, and which *in turn* provides a centrally important mechanism for making community relations fairer.

Wrapping-up then, how should we view the value of equality in the context of severe economic austerity and the challenges and solutions that might be raised and offered in

response? First, it is clear that policy dilemmas and conflicts will heighten not lessen, where competing group interests will play-out more fiercely in the public arena and as resources are restricted, and, in many cases, as demand also increases. Here, it is important for local government to make explicit where these conflicts arise exactly; and, in the process, to explain what *kind* of equality it is seeking and why, recognising, that this is almost bound to lead to other kinds of *inequality* as a result.

Second, when examining the specifics of policy implementation, it is also important to acknowledge that other conflicts exist, not only between groups' interests as such, but also between those duties and/or powers that council have to improve the lives of its citizens. Here, it is clear that as resources are restricted trade-offs often happen *within* the same groups' interests, as *particular* duties and obligations of Local Authorities tend to take priority over less clearly articulated responsibilities and powers.

Third, given these pressures, and many others beside, it becomes especially important to focus on the value of equality as a principle component of the value of fairness. This not only gets us to the 'equality of what' question, of which the answers will be many and various, but also to how we envisage a more equal society which is seen as benefitting all, *rather than* just a few. It is in this latter context, that Newport's Fairness Commission has argued that we should see our social relations as essentially interdependent and reciprocal, rather than independent and isolated; and that Local Government has a unique role to play in celebrating and *enhancing* this interdependency and reciprocity. That is, in encouraging and facilitating the valuable

participation of all its citizens for the benefit of the individual citizen, *and* for other members of the community; but fully recognising, too, that the forms of participation can come in numerous guises, including both paid and unpaid activities.

Finally, then, on the big question this conference is addressing – is equality a necessity or a luxury in 2014? – I would like to conclude with two main points, with apologies to the Minister for reiterating some of the issues he raised in his speech. First, if we are to identify equality purely in terms of economic resources (as some kind of proxy for other types of equality we may also seek to pursue), then mounting international evidence seems to suggest that large inequalities are not only bad for the people at the bottom (in relation to their health, well-being, life-prospects, and so on), but also, surprisingly perhaps, for people at the *top* concerning the very same indicators. In addition, it has been found that large inequalities also seem to undermine rather than *enhance* social mobility, with its presence making it more difficult to move up the social ladder, and so move out from disadvantage.

Secondly, and lastly, it is also important to stress that precisely *how* inequalities are reduced is certainly not just up to Local or even Central Government, as the onus is on us *all* conceptualising and promoting a society which tolerates *much less* the gap between the better-off and the worst-off, and in all spheres of economic, social, and political life. Nevertheless, Local Governments are, I believe, in a unique position, insofar as they are not only close to its citizens and so see very clearly the struggles and endeavours of their local communities, but also they can encourage us to think

more imaginatively and *critically* about the what kind of society we want to commit to. Do we want to commit to a society made-up of isolated and competing individuals and families intent on only securing their own individual and familial self-interest? Or are we prepared to acknowledge, facilitate, and *celebrate*, the interdependent and reciprocal character of our social relations, which are beneficial to *all* (so both the worst-off *and* the better-off). It is in this context that we can take the principles of fairness and equality very seriously *across* our communities, and whether we live in times of economic austerity, *prosperity*, or somewhere in between.