

News release

New history of equalities questions Britain's tradition of 'liberty and tolerance'.

Wednesday 24 March 2010

As the Equality Bill enters its final stages in parliament, a new book edited by leading historian Pat Thane sheds light on the long struggle for equality by some of Britain's most marginalised groups.

In [Unequal Britain: Equalities in Britain since 1945](#), which will be launched at the British Academy tomorrow, Professor Pat Thane and her co-authors illuminate Britain's long history of inequality on the grounds of age, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability.

A [companion paper](#) is published on the History & Policy website today.

Professor Thane shows how the first major advances towards a more equal society occurred in the long period of prosperity after 1945 as gradually standards of living improved together with cultural and technological change. She explores the lessons from this period for current equalities policy. The main drivers towards equality are identified as:

- activism organised by those who experience inequality;
- government institutions established by legislation to promote equality;
- Labour governments, which historically have taken most action to further equality, sometimes against the preferences of voters, as in the late 1960s;
- judgements and initiatives of the EU and European Courts;
- cultural change, in particular the effects of higher standards of living and education, increased social confidence, diminished deference and more relaxed social and sexual attitudes;
- the media, in its new and expanding forms, which can give a voice to people experiencing inequality;
- technological change, for example in facilitating equal living for disabled and older people.

While the inhibitors of equality have been:

- the persistence of hostility and prejudice, reinforced and reflected by some sections of the media;
- the poverty and cultural isolation that often accompanies social inequality.

Professor Thane said:

"Despite the political rhetoric about Britain's traditions of 'liberty' and 'tolerance', the UK actually has a long history of inequality and discrimination on grounds of age, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability.

"Although some long marginalised groups have acquired legal rights, entitlements, social respect and cultural recognition to a degree unimaginable in 1945, substantial inequalities remain. Single mothers, Gypsies and Travellers and pensioners are just some of the groups who still face discrimination in British society today and we have seen recently the disgraceful treatment of all too many people with learning difficulties.

"Nevertheless, since 1945, and especially since the 1960s, activists have come closer to achieving equality, above all, by making their own voices heard as never before and using media opportunities unthinkable in 1946. This legacy of successfully speaking-up is perhaps our best guide for the future.

"As the Equality Bill goes through parliament we should reflect on why it is now possible for a government credibly to propose a statutory duty on public authorities to address inequalities, on how it can be made fully effective and what might be the obstacles. History can help us to think about these things."

Notes for editors

1. The full paper, "Unequal Britain: equalities in Britain since 1945", can be found on the History and Policy website at <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-99.html>
2. The paper is based upon a [report](#) prepared by historians in the Centre for Contemporary British History and the History & Policy network commissioned by the Equalities Review team at the Cabinet Office, now a book edited by Pat Thane as *Unequal Britain. Equalities in Britain since 1945* (Continuum 2010). The book will be launched at the British Academy on the evening of Thursday 25th March, with a discussion chaired by Rob Berkeley, Director of the Runnymede Trust. The speakers will be Pat Thane, Trevor Phillips, Peter Tatchell, Baroness Greengross and Judith Okely.
3. *Unequal Britain* contains a foreword by Julia Neuberger and chapters on: Older People, Race, Religion and Belief, Gypsies and Travellers, Gender, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation and Disability. The co-authors are Liza Filby, Nick Kimber, Helen McCarthy, Simon Millar, Mel Porter, and Becky Taylor.

4. Professor Pat Thane is the Leverhulme Professor of Contemporary British History at the Institute of Historical Research in London. She is a co-founder of History & Policy and the author of many books and articles on welfare, the family, gender and ageing in modern British history.
5. The latest information about the Equality Bill can be found at <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2008-09/equality.html>
6. [History & Policy](#) is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history. The initiative was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the [Centre for Contemporary British History](#), at the [Institute of Historical Research](#), University of London. History & Policy's current work is funded with charitable grants from [Arcadia](#) and [The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#).
7. To keep up to date with the latest History & Policy news, you can [sign up](#) for our monthly newsletter online or [follow us on Twitter](#).
8. History & Policy has a network of over 200 historians willing to engage with policymakers and media. To request an interview with Pat Thane or another historian, please contact: Mel Porter, External Relations Manager, Tel: 020 7862 8768 Email: mel.porter@sas.ac.uk, or Ruth Evans, External Relations Officer. Tel: 020 7862 8783, Email: ruth.evans@sas.ac.uk