

Gap between rich and rest puts society at risk^[1]

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In 1987, Margaret Thatcher, then the British prime minister, declared that there is no such thing as society. "There are individual men and women and there are families, and no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first."

Ever since I came across Thatcher's 1987 interview for Women's Own magazine, this piece of bleak reasoning has stuck with me because it seductively distills the corrosive attitude that forms the basis of so much suffering among our own populations.

On a per-capita basis, western societies are as wealthy as ever.

Yes, we are in the middle of a crisis that has exposed some ugly truths about our economic model, but the standard of living when measured against 20, 40 or 60 years ago has been trending in one direction (think life spans, access to clean drinking water, literacy, child mortality, access to primary education).

If we measure quality of life using these criteria, developing countries are catching up.

Some, like South Korea and Taiwan, have already caught up (a fact that has yet to penetrate the western world's collective consciousness despite the best efforts of Swedish professor Hans Rosling, whose visually stunning presentations on this topic should be required viewing in every classroom and newsroom in the world).

I mention this because their success has -- thus far -- not been our loss. Our GDP has continued to grow, our universities and businesses have continued to innovate and, although rising standards of living have placed a greater stress on the world's finite resources, China's ability to house, educate and care for its people has not affected Canada's ability to do so one bit.

Economic productivity per hour worked is up everywhere because of technological advances and, in every part of the world that has not experienced war, the capabilities and resources available to give citizens a better life are increasing.

So why does it feel as if things are getting worse?

The problem is that in many parts of the western world the social contract is frayed, if not fully torn.

There is a massive polarization in views and attitudes between different social groups, and whatever solidarity existed after the Second World War has slowly faded with every offshore job, unpaid tax bill, privatized service and false welfare claim.

In the U.S., the gap between the rich and the rest is the largest it has been since the 1920s.

To give some idea of the scale of this problem, a recently released report by the New York-based think-tank Fiscal Policy Institute notes that "given its degree of inequality, if New York City were a nation, it would rank 15th worst among 134 countries with respect to income concentration, in between Chile and Honduras."

Such a gap between the rich and poor is corrosive to everyone, but before some mitigating programs can be introduced (such as universal access to university education or truly universal health care), a generally agreed-on idea about the public desirability of a more equal society needs to take shape.

The problem is that the idea that there is such a thing as a public good (to be paid for by everyone for society's benefit) has been under attack since Thatcher's version of capitalism began to spread around the world in the 1980s.

All this leaves us with a situation where we have more wealth than ever and more technological means than ever, but tuition fees, health-care costs and other costs of what we consider a secure middle-class life have been going up across the western world while incomes for working people have remained stagnant.

This -- more than any bank balance sheet or government budget -- is what is unsustainable about the present situation, and this is what needs to be fixed.

Re-establishing the ironclad consensus that public goods are desirable for a healthy society is never easy, and my only hope is that we will not need another cataclysm (whether war, ecosystem collapse or alien invasion) to figure out that, yes, we are all in it together.

- reprinted from the Times Colonist

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